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VERONICA

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"AUNT MARGARET'S TROUBLE," "MABEL'S PROGRESS,"
&c. &c.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

BOOK IV.—*continued.*

	PAGE
CHAPTER VII.	
SUCCESS	1
CHAPTER VIII.	
CONFESSION	14
CHAPTER IX.	
CONFIDENCE	27
CHAPTER X.	
THE MEETING	39
CHAPTER XI.	
THE PARTNERS	61
CHAPTER XII.	
TROUBLE	74

BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.	
A RETROSPECTIVE MEDITATION	89
CHAPTER II.	
MISS TURTLE	100
CHAPTER III.	
MRS. FLEW	114

	PAGE
CHAPTER IV.	
AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL	130
CHAPTER V.	
PRINCE AND PRINCESS	145
CHAPTER VI.	
HOME, SWEET HOME!	158
CHAPTER VII.	
MRS. FLEW SPEAKS HER MIND	171
CHAPTER VIII.	
AN AWKWARD IDIOM	191
CHAPTER IX.	
A RESOURCE	206
CHAPTER X.	
A FRIENDLY TEA-DRINKING	219
CHAPTER XI.	
TEMPEST	231
CHAPTER XII.	
IN TIME	248
CHAPTER XIII.	
ZILLAH'S RESOLUTION	267
CHAPTER XIV.	
THE LAST PLANK	281
CHAPTER XV.	
INFELICE!	297
CHAPTER XVI.	
THE END	307

VERONICA.

BOOK IV.

CHAPTER VII.

SUCCESS.

CESARE had understood partially, how desirable a thing it was for Veronica to be acknowledged by Sir Matthew Gale. But in his ennui and ill-humour he was inclined to be captious and jealous.

"You could receive those men without having Louise in the room?" he said reproachfully after the baronet and Mr. Davis were gone.

"Certainly, I could!"

"I suppose if that old blockhead of a Sir Gale were to come alone, you would receive him in the same way?"

"Most likely. What then? Don't be absurd, Cesare."

"Ebbene, I think it very unjust, unkind, cruel, that I should be the only person debarred from your society in the way I am!"

"Debarred from my society? Dio mio! It seems to me, Cesare, that you are here all day long."

"Oh, I trouble you? I importune you? You have no heart. You do not love me."

Then came a quarrel, not the first, by many, which ended, as all its predecessors had ended, by Cesare's making humble apologies and protestations of devotion.

"Ah, Veronica mia," he sighed, "I wish sometimes that there had never been any question of this money! You would have married me and we should have been together all this time. We would have gone down to the country house beyond Salerno. How happy it would have been! I hate this England of yours! I have scarcely had a happy moment since I came here."

"Cesare, that sounds all very fine, but how much does it mean? If you and I had married and stayed in Italy, we should have been dining off dry bread and melon-rinds by this time. And how charming for me to be going

about in a coarse petticoat and jacket, with a copper pin stuck in my hair, and no shoes or stockings! Neapolitan peasants are very picturesque at the Opera: but I fancy the real life of the real people would not quite suit you. It would not suit *me* at all events."

"My wife would not have had to live as you say," remonstrated Cesare.

"Oh andiamo, cugino mio! I know pretty well what sort of style 'your wife' would have had to live in. And the fact is we should have been much worse off than the peasants, because we should have had to appear something different from what we were. Shabby gentility—— Ouf! it makes me shudder! And as to your not liking England, you know nothing of it yet. If we were rich, Cesare, you would see how the world would be cap in hand to us!"

"I don't think I want the world to be cap in hand to me. I only want you to love me," answered Cesare, pathetically.

Then Veronica gave him her hand and sent him away, alleging that she was tired. In truth she was tired in spirit. She was getting very weary of Cesare's complaints and importunities. She had felt herself to be in the position of guiding spirit since their ar-

rival in London. In Naples, where she had, whilst domineering over him, depended on him for support in many things, she had liked him better. For her own nature was too entirely undisciplined not to be irked by the task of leading another. She hated the trouble of thinking, arranging, and deciding. And there were in her some glimmerings of nobler things, which made her scorn herself at times, and consequently scorn Cesare for his submissive idolatry of her.

As she had once told Maud, she saw the better and chose the worse. If Cesare would but assume a more manly tone—if he would even be rough and self-asserting—she fancied she should be less discontented. He complained and grumbled indeed, but it was in the tone of a child who vents its temper, well knowing all the while that it must finally submit. Once, in a moment of irritation, she dropped some word of the kind to Cesare. And his amazed and sorrowful reception of the word nearly drove her wild.

“I don’t understand you, Veronica,” he had said, reproachfully. “It seems to me that you are very ungrateful. No woman was ever loved more truly than I love you.

Do you *wish* for unkindness and tyranny? Who can comprehend a woman?"

Poor Veronica did not comprehend herself. She could not tell him that his complaisance for her whims, his devotion to her wishes, alienated her from him. She could not tell him that his humouring of her haughty temper degraded her in her own esteem. And yet she wished to love Cesare. She was fully minded to become Principessa de' Barletti, and the prospect of that union without affection afforded a glimpse of something so terrible that she shut her mind's eyes before it, shuddering.

But she would be true to Cesare. And she *would* love him. Poor Cesare; he was kind and gentle, and she was really fond of him. And by-and-bye—so she told herself—she would be able to influence and change him in many things. But meanwhile that which she yearned for, and thought of at every solitary moment of her waking time, was to see Maud.

She had been much moved when at Naples Mr. Frost had made known to her the contents of Sir John Gale's will. For a moment the thought had flashed across her mind that she would give up her own claim, and allow

the will to be put in force in Maud's favour. If she made no sign the will would be proved and executed in due course. It was a wildly Quixotic idea, she told herself in her calmer moments, but it recurred to her again and again. Yet it may be truly said that never for one moment did the idea amount to an intention. The result to herself of carrying it out would be ignominy, obscurity, poverty. Poverty!—No; that was beyond her strength. Maud, she knew, could be happy without pomp and wealth: happier without them than their possession could ever make her (Veronica). Yet she did not deceive herself with the pretence that this knowledge influenced her conduct.

"I am no canting hypocrite," she said to herself.

It is a negative merit not seldom assumed by those who find it desirable to feed their egotism at all costs. And the implied assumption is, "You, who do not act in accordance with what you *must* feel—for do not *I* feel it?—are canting hypocrites."

But despite everything, there was in Veronica's heart a craving, hungry desire to see Maud. Maud's had ever been the one influ-

ence that had awakened whatsoever impulses of good lay dormant in the vicar's daughter. Even when she had chafed against that influence it had been dear to her. And Maud alone, of all the beings she had ever known, she had loved unselfishly, and from her heart. She shrank from the idea of seeing her father as yet. She would like to go to him victorious, assured, bearing a new and illustrious title, whose blaze should efface whatever dimness now overshadowed her name. She knew, without reflecting much about it, that by her father much might be forgiven to the Princess de' Barletti which could never have been pardoned to Veronica Levincourt. But with Maud it was different. She thought of Maud day and night, and devised schemes for getting to see her, which schemes, however, never took shape in action.

Late in the afternoon of the day on which Sir Matthew Gale had visited her, Mr. Simpson arrived at her hotel. He had come in all haste to be the first to communicate to her the news of Hugh Lockwood's statement. And he was followed within a very few minutes by Mr. Lane, who was bound on the same errand.

"Then," said Veronica, rising in an excited manner, after having heard what they had to tell her, "the cause is won!"

"I believe that I may safely congratulate you, Lady Gale," said Mr. Simpson. "You will assuredly meet with no opposition from Sir John's family."

"And did Mr. Lockwood give this decisive testimony voluntarily?"

"Oh, yes, my lady," said Mr. Lane. "That, I must say, he did. Mr. Lovegrove showed plainly enough which way *his* feelings jumped in the matter. If it had depended on him, we should have had plenty of trouble."

"Mr. Lovegrove was doing what I should have done in his place," said Mr. Simpson, gravely. "He was endeavouring to protect Miss Desmond's interests."

"Well, he might have done that without being so bumptious. If it hadn't been for not wishing to make trouble for my lady and Sir Matthew, I would have given him a good setting down!"

"Ahem! I have a great respect for Mr. Lovegrove," said Mr. Simpson, in the same slow, imperturbable manner.

During this talk, Veronica was standing at the window, with her back to the two men,

and her hands pressed on her temples. She was thinking of the strange chance that had made Hugh Lockwood the arbiter of her fate.

There are no limits to the vagaries and self-delusions of indulged vanity, none to its gluttonous appetite. There is nothing on earth it will not clutch at to feed upon.

Veronica well remembered the evident admiration she had excited in Hugh when they had met at Lowater. And without putting it even mentally into words, she had an idea that his coming forward unasked to give witness in her favour, was in some way due to the resistless influence of her beauty. What would he think when he learned that she was to be Princess Barletti? The question gave rise to some not unpleasing speculations. Mr. Lane's next words, however, rudely disturbed them.

"Young Lockwood certainly did behave very straightforward. I wonder that Mr. Lovegrove didn't bully *him*! For if I lost two thousand pounds by the business, young Lockwood lost more, seeing that he is engaged to the young lady."

Veronica turned round to listen.

"I must be going now, Lady Gale," said Mr. Simpson. "I merely wanted to give you

the news. There is a great deal to be done yet. I must try to see Mr. Davis without delay.”

“One moment, if you please, Mr. Simpson. Did you say that Mr. Lockwood was—was——”

“Engaged,” put in Mr. Lane. “Yes, my lady; he is engaged to marry Miss Desmond—so he said, at least. I believe him to be a most respectable young man,” added the agent, with a patronising air.

Considerably to Mr. Lane’s surprise, Veronica, after having given her hand to Mr. Simpson as he took his leave, dismissed him (Lane) with a haughty bow. And Mr. Lane observed to the lawyer before they parted company at the hotel door, that “my lady” was beginning to give herself great airs already.

Left alone in the gathering dusk, Veronica, began to pace up and down the room, in a restless manner that had recently become habitual with her. She had gained what she had striven for. She was Lady Gale. And although the whole of Sir John’s vast fortune would not be hers, she would still be a rich woman—rich even in rich England. She would be reinstated in the world, and take a

far higher rank than that of a mere baronet's lady. All that she had longed for and dreamt of since her childhood seemed to be within her grasp.

Of ten persons who should have seen her, knowing her story, nine would certainly have concluded that it was on this important revolution of Fortune's wheel she was meditating, as she passed regularly up and down the room, the heavy folds of her long black dress making a monotonous dull rustling sound on the carpet. But it was not so. How often it happens that the outer and the inner life are thus distinct and different! That which we strive for, is often not that which really most occupies our hearts. There was as yet no flavour of Dead-Sea fruit in Fortune's gifts to Veronica. She believed still, as she had believed at fifteen, that to be rich, fashionable, envied, and flattered, would suffice to make her happy. But in these very first moments of her triumph, her thoughts and feelings were busy with Maud and Hugh!

All at once she ceased her pacing to and fro, and seating herself at a little table, covered with writing materials, she dashed off a hurried note. She wrote without pause, almost as though she feared she might repent

what she was doing, if she stayed to reflect on it. Having written and sealed the note, which consisted only of a few lines, she gave orders that a messenger should be despatched with it forthwith.

"Where is it to go, my lady?" asked the waiter.

The tidings of Veronica's golden fortunes must, one would have thought, have hovered in the air, or emanated from herself in some subtle manner, for the man, always civil, was now obsequious.

"It must be taken to Mr. Lovegrove, the solicitor in Bedford-square. He is easily to be found. There is my card. Give my compliments, and say that I shall be exceedingly obliged if Mr. Lovegrove will do me the favour to add the number of the house to the address on this note. Then let the messenger take the note to Gower-street without delay. He had best drive. Let him take a cab and go quickly."

The reader may as well see the contents of the note :

I thank you for what you have done for me to-day. But my thanks are, doubtless, of small value in your eyes.

But I have a request—an entreaty to make to you. Let me see Maud. I shall be quite alone all this evening and to-morrow. Others may think me triumphant, but tell Maud—oh pray tell Maud—that I long and yearn to see her and to hear her voice.

I only learned to-day that you are to be her husband.

VERONICA GALE.

To Hugh Lockwood, Esq.

I trust to you to speak of this to *no one* but Maud.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONFESSION.

HUGH did not communicate to his mother the fact of his interview with Mr. Frost until after his visit to Mr. Lovegrove's office, and he informed her of both circumstances at the same time. He could not refrain from saying a word about her having kept Mr. Frost's visit to Gower-street a secret from him.

"I was so surprised, mother," he said. "It seemed so unlike you. But I suppose he persuaded you in some way that it would be right not to mention his having come to our house."

"Was I bound to speak of it, Hugh—before Maud, too, and Mr. Levincourt?"

"No; of course not *bound*. But it would have seemed more natural if you had mentioned it quietly to me."

Mrs. Lockwood was silent.

"Look here, mother dear," said Hugh, after a short silence, "I am not good at hiding what I feel. I was a little hurt and vexed when Mr. Frost told me that you and he had privately discussed my feeling for Maud long before you had ever said a word to me on that subject. Now the truth is out!"

"He—Mr. Frost—told you that, Hugh?"

"Well, he did not say it verbatim et literatim as I have said it; but he certainly gave me to understand that such was the case."

"I meant for the best, Hugh."

"Meant for the best! Dearest mother, you don't suppose I doubt that? But don't let that man come between you and me, mother dear."

"I thought you liked Mr. Frost, Hugh?"

"So I did. He was my father's friend. I have known him all my life. But lately there has been something about him that revolts—no, that is too strong a word—there has been something about him that seems to put me on my guard. I hate to have to be on my guard!"

"It is a very good attitude to face the world with."

"Ah, mother, you know we might have some discussion on that too. But, at all

events, it is not the posture I like—or, indeed, that I am able—to assume towards my friends. With mistrust affection vanishes.”

Mrs. Lockwood winced and turned her pale face from her son.

“But, mother,” he proceeded, “I have another piece of news to add—a disagreeable piece of news; but you must try not to take it too much to heart.”

Then he told her of the disappointing letter he had received from Herbert Snowe. This, however, did not seem to grieve her so much as he had expected. In truth she could not help faintly hoping that it might give her anxieties a reprieve, by putting off yet awhile Hugh’s endeavour to make a start for himself. But he did not leave her long in this delusion.

“I must try to borrow the money elsewhere,” said he. “The opportunity of buying that connexion is too good a one to be lost without an effort.”

“Did he not say something—did not Mr. Frost make you an offer of a desirable position elsewhere?” asked Mrs. Lockwood, hesitatingly.

“Oh, I suppose he mentioned *that* to you, also during his mysterious visit? Well, mo-”

ther, I am not mysterious, and I was about to tell you that he did make me an offer on the part of this new company in which he is interested. But——”

“But you refused it!”

Hugh explained to his mother that in order not to appear obstinate and ungracious, he had taken two days to consider of the proposition. But he added that his mind was already made up on the subject.

“The truth is,” he said, “that I mistrust the whole business. There are rumours afloat about the Company which would make a prudent man think twice before he had anything to do with it.”

“But you would be a paid employé. You would run no risk.”

“I should risk losing my time and getting neither cash nor credit.”

“Is it really thought so ill of, this undertaking?”

“In our office it is spoken of as a very unsafe concern. My own opinion is this: if things had gone well in the English money market the Parthenope Embellishment *might* have turned up trumps. But it is all hazard—unprincipled gambling on a great scale, and with other folks’ money! One or two more

failures of great houses such as we have had lately would involve the company in ruin. But you need not look so anxious, dear little mother. Our unambitious little craft is out of such deep waters, and will keep out of them."

"Do you suppose, Hugh," asked Mrs. Lockwood in her usual deliberate calm tones, but with cheeks even paler than usual, "have you any reason for supposing that Mr. Frost has ventured money in this company?"

"*His own money* you mean?"—for of course he has ventured other people's if he puffs the thing to every one as he did to me!—well, I cannot say. People are beginning to say that he is not so solid a man as was supposed. I hear Heaven knows how these things get about—that he has a very extravagant wife, and that he has been rash in speculating;—mother, what is the matter?"

Hugh suddenly checked his speech to ask this question: for Mrs. Lockwood had dropped her head on her hands, and the tears were running down her face.

"Mother! Darling mother, do speak to me! For God's sake tell me what is the matter? Is it *my* fault? Have I done or said anything to vex you?"

.

She shook her head silently ; but the tears gathered and fell more quickly and copiously at every moment.

"Hugh," she faltered out at last, "I tried to do right."

"Tried to do right ! You *have* done right —always right. You are the best woman in the world."

"Don't, Hugh ! Don't talk so ! It goes to my heart to hear you when I know how your tone would change if I were to tell you——"

"To tell me what ?" asked Hugh, almost breathless with surprise and apprehension.

"Oh, Hugh, Hugh, you would not love me if I were to confess some great fault to you. You are like the rest of the men ; your love is so mingled with pride !"

"Some great fault !" echoed Hugh.

"There ! There it is, the stern look on your face like your father !"

The poor woman bowed her face yet lower, and hid it in her hands, while her delicate frame shook with sobs. For a few minutes, which seemed an interminable time to her, Hugh stood silent, and looking, as she had said, very stern. He was struggling with himself, and undergoing a painful ordeal

which was not expressed in the set lines of his strong young face. At length he went to his mother, knelt beside her chair, and took her hand.

"Mother," he said, "nothing can blot out all the years of love and care and tenderness you have given to me. I cannot believe that you have been guilty of any great fault. Your sensitive conscience exaggerates its importance no doubt. But," here he made a little pause and went on with an effort, "but *whatever* it may be, if you will confide in me, I shall never cease to love you. You are my own dear mother! Nothing can alter that."

"Oh, my boy!" she cried, and threw her arms round his neck as he knelt beside her.

Then in a moment the weary secret of years came out. She told him all the truth, from the miserable story of her youth to the time of her marriage, and the subsequent persecution from which Mr. Frost had relieved her, and the price she had had to pay for that relief. As she spoke, holding her son in her arms and resting her head on his shoulder, she wondered at herself for having endured the torments of bearing her solitary burden all these years, and at the apprehension she had

felt at the thought of the confession which now seemed so easy, sweet, and natural.

Hugh heard her without speaking, only now and then pressing the hand he held in his to give her courage when she faltered.

"Oh, mother, how you have suffered in your life!" That was his first thought when she ceased to speak. His next thought he was fain to utter, although it sounded like a reproach.

"If you had but trusted my father! He loved you so truly."

"Ah, Hugh, if I had! But it was so terrible to me to risk losing his love. And he often said—as you have been used to say after him—that he could never reinstate in his heart any one who had once been guilty of deliberate deception. You cannot know, you strong upright natures, how the weak are bent and warped. You cannot—or so I feared—make allowance for temptation, or give credit for all the hard struggle and combat that ends sometimes in defeat at last."

Hugh could not quite easily get over the revelation his mother had made. He had struggled with himself to be gentle with her. He would not add to her pain by look or

gesture, if he could help it. But he knew that all was not as it had been between them. He knew that he could never again feel the absolute proud trust in his mother which had been a joy to him for so many years. Tenderness, gratitude, and pity remained. But the past was past, and irrevocable. The pain of this knowledge acted as a spur to his resentment against Mr. Frost.

"You have the paper acknowledging this man's debt to my father?" said Hugh. "It will not be difficult to make him disgorge. *He* to patronise me, and help me, and offer me this and that, when an act of common honesty would have put me in a position to help myself years ago!"

"Hugh, the dreadful idea that you hinted at, just now, has been in my mind for some time past, although I dared not dwell on it. I mean the fear that he may not be *able* to make immediate restitution of the money due to you."

"Restitution or exposure: I shall give him the choice, though I feel that even so I am in some degree compounding with knavery."

Mrs. Lockwood clasped and unclasped her hands nervously.

"He always found some excuse for putting me off all these years," she said.

"He shall not put me off, I promise him."

"Oh, my boy, if through my cowardice you should lose all that your poor father worked so hard to bequeath to you!"

"We will hope better, mother dear. This man must have enough to pay me what he owes. It is a great deal to us, but not much to a rich man. He has been in a fine position for years, and the name of the firm stands high."

"And about—about the will, and Maud's inheritance?" stammered Mrs. Lockwood.

The calm security of her manner had given place to a timid hesitation in addressing Hugh, that was almost pathetic.

"Do not let us speak of that, dear mother," said Hugh, "or my choler will rise beyond my power to control it. That man is a consummate scoundrel. He was—I am sure of it now, I suspected it then—trying to sound me as to the probability of my being induced to bear false witness."

"Oh, Hugh!"

"He thought it might be highly convenient for him, and might ease his pocket and his cares (not his conscience; *that* he is not

troubled with) if I—— It won't bear thinking of."

"May you not be mistaken? And may there not be some excuse——?"

"Excuse!" echoed Hugh.

His mother shrank back silently at the fierce tone of his voice. He walked to the door, and had almost passed out of the room, when she called him: but in so low and hesitating a tone that he stood uncertain whether she had spoken or not.

"Did you call me, mother?" he said.

"You never left me before without a word or a kiss, Hugh, since you were a toddling child."

He came back at once, and took her in his arms, and kissed her forehead fondly. But after he was gone, she sat and cried bitterly. A strange kind of repentance grew up in her mind; a repentance not so much for the evil done, as for the tardy confession of it. Yet it had seemed, so long as the confession was yet unspoken, and even while she was speaking it, as if it must take a load from her heart.

"If I had held my tongue," she thought, "my son would have loved me, and trusted me still. Now I am afraid to see him again,

lest I should find some change in him, my boy whom I love better than my life! What signified the money? I might have let it go. He knew nothing of it, and he would not have grieved for it. What phantom of duty was it, that haunted and harried me into doing this thing?"

She forgot, in the present pain of her mortified love and pride, all the miserable hours that secrecy had cost her. Her soul was tossed to and fro by many revulsions of feeling before her meditations were ended. The untoward teachings of her youth were bearing bitter fruit. She did not lack courage. She could endure, and had endured much, with fortitude and energy. But the greatness of Renunciation was not hers. She had balanced her sufferings against her faults, all her life long. She had been prone to demand strict justice for herself, and to think that she meted it out rigidly to others. There had been a secret sustaining consolation amid the heart-breaking troubles of her younger days, in the conviction that they were undeserved. Pride has always a balm for the sting of injustice. But for the stroke of merited calamity, humility alone brings healing.

Zillah thought that she had paid her price

of suffering. She had faced the pain of confessing to her son that she had sinned. And yet the peace which that pain was meant to purchase, did not descend upon her heart. She had not learned even yet, that no human sacrifice can bribe the past to hide its face and be silent. We must learn to look upon the irrevocable without rancour: thus, and thus only, does its stern sphinx-face reveal to us a sweetness and a wisdom of its own.

CHAPTER IX.

CONFIDENCE.

It was past six o'clock on that same spring evening when Veronica's note was delivered at Gower-street. Hugh had just quitted his mother, after the interview recorded in the preceding chapter, and was crossing the little entrance hall when the messenger arrived.

"Are you Mr. Hugh Lockwood, sir?" asked the man. "I was told to give the letter into his own hands."

Hugh assured the messenger that he was right; and began to read the note as he stood there, with some anxiety. When he had glanced quickly through the note, he turned to the messenger.

"Are you to wait for an answer?" he said.

"No, sir; I had no instructions about that."

“Very good. I will send or bring the reply. Tell Lady Gale that her note has been safely received.”

When the man was gone, Hugh ran up to his own room to read the letter again, and to consider its contents. What should he do? That he must tell Maud of it was clear to him. He did not think he should be justified in withholding it from her. But how should he advise her to act? He cogitated for some time without coming to any conclusion; and at last went in search of her, determined to let himself be greatly guided by her manner of receiving that which he had to impart.

He found Maud in the little drawing-room that had been so long occupied by Lady Tallis. She was selecting and packing some music to take away with her; for she was to accompany her guardian to Shipley in two days. Mrs. Sheardown had invited her to stay at Lowater House for a while. But Maud had declared that she could not leave Mr. Levin-court for the first week or so of his return home. Afterwards she had promised to divide her time as nearly as might be between Lowater and the vicarage.

“What are you doing there, my own?”

You look as pale as a spirit in the twilight," said Hugh, entering the room.

"I am doing what spirits have no occasion for—packing up," she answered. "Luggage is, however, a condition of civilised mortality, against which it is vain to rebel."

"It is a condition of mortality which you of the gentler sex accept with great fortitude, I have always heard. Perhaps there may be something of the martyr-spirit, in the perseverance with which one sees women drag about piles of portmanteaus and bandboxes!"

He answered lightly and cheerfully, as she had spoken. But his heart sank at the prospect of so speedily parting with her.

"See, dear Hugh," said Maud, pointing to a packet of unbound music she had put aside, "these are to be left in your charge. The rest—Beethoven's sonatas, Haydn's, Hummel's, and a few of the songs I shall take with me. I have packed up the sonatas of Kozeluch that I used to play with Mr. Plew—poor Mr. Plew!"

She smiled, but a tear was in her eye, and her voice shook a little. Presently she went on. "I have chosen all the old things that uncle Charles is fond of. He said the other

day that he never had any music now. Music was always one of his great pleasures."

"I have not heard you play or sing for some time, Maud."

"Not since—not since dear Aunt Hilda died. I have not cared to make music for my own sake. But I shall be thankful if I can cheer uncle Charles by it."

Hugh drew near her, and looked down proudly on the golden-haired head bending over the music. "And must I lose you, my own love?" he said sadly.

"Lose me, Hugh! No; that you must not. Don't be too sorry, you poor boy. Remember how I shall be loving you, all the time—yes, all the time, every hour that we are parted."

She put up her hands on his shoulders, and laid her shining head against his breast with fond simplicity.

"Ah, my own, best darling! Always unselfish, always encouraging, always brave. What troubles can hurt me that leave me your love? My heart has no room for anything but gratitude when I think of you, Maud."

"Are there troubles, Hugh?" she asked, quickly, holding him away from her, and looking up into his face. "If you really think

me brave, you will let me know the troubles. It is my right, you know."

"There are no troubles—no real troubles. But I will tell you everything, and take counsel of my wise little wife. First, I must tell you that I carried out our plan this day. Don't start, darling. I went to Mr. Lovegrove's office, where I found Mr. Simpson, the lawyer employed by—by the other side, and Lane, the agent. I told them what I had to say as briefly as possible, just as you bade me."

"Oh, I am so grateful to you, Hugh. And the result? Tell me in a word."

"I have no doubt Veronica's claim will be established. Indeed, I believe that it may be said to be so already."

"Thank God!"

"I will give you the details of my interview later, if you care to hear them. But, now, I have something else to say to you. Sit down by me here on the couch. I have just had a note—— You tremble! Your little hands are cold! Maud, my darling, there is nothing to fear!"

"No, dear Hugh. I do not fear. I fear nothing as long as you hold my hand in yours. But I—I——"

"You have been agitated and excited too much lately. I know it, dearest. I hate to distress you. But I am sure it would not be right to conceal this thing from you."

"Thank you, Hugh."

"I got this note not half an hour ago. Can you see to read it by this light?"

She took the small perfumed note to the window, and read it through eagerly. Whilst she was reading Hugh kept silence, and watched her with tender anxiety. In a minute she turned her face towards him and held out her hand.

"When may I go? You will take me, Hugh? Let us lose no time."

"You wish to go, then?"

"Wish to go! Oh, yes, yes, Hugh. Dear Hugh, you will not oppose it?"

"I will not oppose it, Maud, if you tell me, after a little reflection, that you seriously wish to go."

"I think I ought to see her."

"She does not deserve it of you."

"Dear Hugh, she has done wrong. She deceived her father, and was cruelly deceived in her turn. I know there is nothing so abominable to you as insincerity."

Hugh thought of his own many speeches to

that effect, and then of his mother's recent revelation; and so thinking, he winced a little and turned away his head.

"You are accustomed to expect moral strength and rectitude from having the example of your mother always before your eyes. But ought we to set our faces against the weak who wish to return to the right?"

"I know not what proof of such a wish has been given by—Lady Gale."

"Dearest Hugh, if she were all heartless and selfish she would not long to see me in the hour of her triumph."

"She says no word of her father."

Maud's face fell a little, and she bent her head thoughtfully.

"Does that show much heart?" continued Hugh.

"Perhaps—I think—I do believe that she is more afraid of him than she is of me. And that would not be unnatural, Hugh. Listen, dear. I do not defend, nor even excuse, Veronica. But if, now—having seen to what misery, for herself and others, ambition, and vanity, and worldliness have led—she is wavering at a turning-point in her life where a kind hand, a loving word, may have power

to strengthen her in better things, ought I not to give them to her if I can?"

"If," said Hugh, slowly, "you can do so without repugnance, without doing violence to your own feelings, perhaps——"

"I can! I can indeed, Hugh! Ah, you who have been blessed with a good and wise mother, cannot guess how much of what is faulty in Veronica is due to early indulgence. Poor Aunt Stella was kind, but she could neither guide nor rule such a nature as Veronica's. And then, Hugh—don't give me credit for more than I deserve—I do long to see her. She was my sister for so many years. And I loved her—I have always loved her. Let me go!"

They debated when and how this was to be.

"I hate the idea of your going to see her unknown to Mr. Levincourt," said Hugh. "I believe he will be justly hurt and angered when he hears of it. If you have any influence with her, you must try to induce her to make some advances to her father. It is her barest duty. And—listen, my dearest." As he spoke he drew her fondly to his side as though to encourage her against the gravity of his words, and the serious resolution in his face. "Listen to me, Maud. You must make

this lady understand that your path in life and hers will henceforward be widely different. It must be so. Were we to plan the contrary, circumstances would still be too strong for us. She will be rich. We, my Maudie, shall only be just not very poor. She will live in gay cities; we in an obscure provincial nook. The social atmosphere that will in all probability surround Lady Gale, would not suit my lily. And our climate would be too bleak for her."

"I will do what you tell me, Hugh. When may I go? To-night?"

"She says in her note that she will be at home all to-morrow."

"Yes; but she also says 'this evening.' And, besides, to-morrow will be my last day with you!"

"Thanks, darling. Well, Maud, if you are prepared—if you are strong enough—we will go to-night."

Hugh went down-stairs, and informed his mother that he and Maud were going out for awhile, but would return to supper.

It was not unusual for them to take an evening walk together, after the business of the day was over for Hugh.

"Are you going to the park, Hugh?" asked Mrs. Lockwood.

"No, mother."

At another time she would have questioned him further. But now there was a sore feeling at her heart which made her refrain. Was he growing less kind, less confiding already? Were these the first fruits of her miserable weakness in confessing what she might still have hidden? She was too proud, or too prudent—perhaps at the bottom of her heart too just—to show any temper or suspicion. She merely bade him see that Maud was well wrapped up, as the evenings were still chilly.

And then when the street door had closed upon them, she sat and watched their progress down the long dreary street from behind the concealment of the wire blind in her little parlour, with a yearning sense of unhappiness.

Arrived at the bottom of the street, Hugh called a cab. "You must drive to the place, my pet," he said, putting Maud into the vehicle. "It is a long way; and you must not be tired or harassed when you reach the hotel."

"Oh, where is it, Hugh? How odd that I never thought of asking! But I put my

hand into yours and come with you, much as a little child follows its nurse. . Sometimes I feel—you won't laugh, Hugh?"

"I shall not laugh, Maudie. I am in no laughing mood. I may smile, perhaps. But smiles and tears are sometimes near akin, you know."

"Well, then, I feel very often when I am with you, as I have never felt with any one except my mother. I can remember the perfect security, the sense of repose and trust I had in her presence. I was so sure of her love. It came down like the dew from heaven. I needed to make no effort, to say one word. I was a tiny child when I lost her, but I have never forgotten that feeling. And since, since I have loved you, Hugh, it seems to me as though it had come back to me in all its peace and sweetness."

"My own treasure!"

They sat silent with their hands locked in each other's until they had nearly reached the place they were bound for. Then Hugh said: "We are nearly at our destination, Maud. I shall leave you after I have seen you safely in the hotel. It is now half-past seven. At nine o'clock I will come back for you. You will be ready?"

"Yes, Hugh."

"God bless you, my dearest. I shall be glad when this interview is over. My precious white lily, these sudden gusts and storms shake you too much!"

"Oh," she answered, smiling into his face, though with a trembling lip, "there are lilies of a tougher fibre than you think for! And they are elastic, the poor slight things. It is the strong, stiff, stubborn tree that gets broken."

"Am I stiff and stubborn, Maudie?"

"No; you are strong and good, and I am so grateful to you!"

He inquired in the hall of the hotel for Lady Gale, and found that directions had been given to admit Maud whenever she might present herself.

"Miss Desmond," said the porter, "Lady Gale begs you will go up-stairs. This way, if you please."

The man directed a waiter to conduct Miss Desmond to Lady Gale's apartment. Hugh gave her a hurried pressure of the hand, whispered, "At nine, Maud," and stood watching her until her slight figure had disappeared, passing lightly and noiselessly up the thickly-carpeted stairs.

CHAPTER X.

THE MEETING.

WHEN Maud, following her conductor, reached the door of the sitting-room, she stopped the servant by a quick gesture from opening it and announcing her.

"I am expected," she said, almost in a whisper. "I will go in by myself."

She entered a large, dimly-lighted room. The furniture, always sombre, had once been also rich, but was now merely dingy. A fire burnt in a low, wide grate at one end of it. On the tall, old-fashioned mantelpiece stood a couple of branch candlesticks, holding lighted wax tapers. From their position, these illuminated only the upper part of the room; the rest was more or less in deep shadow. There was a large arm-chair drawn to one side of the fireplace. Its back was toward the principal door of the room. But one entering

from the staircase could see the long draperies of the occupant of the chair, against which a white drooping hand was strongly relieved.

Maud stood still for a second. Not for longer than a second; for, almost immediately, she closed the door behind her; and the noise, though slight, attracted the attention of the solitary person who sat there. Maud had but an instant in which to observe her melancholy drooping attitude, when the lady turned her head, peering into the dimness of the distant part of the room, and suddenly rose and leaned with both hands on the back of her chair.

“Veronica!”

Veronica drew in her breath with a great gasp, almost like a sob, and held out her arms. In an instant Maud held her in a close embrace, kissing her and crying over her with a gush of unrestrained tears.

But Veronica stood as silent as a statue, straining the other tightly in her arms, tearless, and with ice-cold hands and lips, until all at once she pressed Maud down into the chair, and sank on to the floor at her feet in her old familiar posture, burying her face on Maud's knees.

Presently Maud spoke. “Dear Veronica,

will you not get up and sit beside me? I want to see you."

Veronica raised her head.

"And I want to see *you*, Maudie. It all seems unreal. I can't believe that I am hearing your voice."

She slowly rose up from the floor, and stood bending a little over Maud, and holding her hands. Both girls were in deep mourning. Maud wore a plain merino gown, trimmed with a little crape. Veronica's rich rustling silk robe swept the ground, and was elaborately adorned with all the art of a Parisian dressmaker. Jet gleamed mysteriously here and there upon it, and its deep crape trimming was of a very different texture and quality from that which Maud wore.

Veronica fixed her eyes on Maud's face. The latter was rather pale, and her eyes bore traces of the tears they had just shed. But she was still the same Maud whom Veronica had known and loved. Her bright hair shone like a golden-tinged cloud at sunset above her black garments. There was the broad clear brow, the mobile mouth, the earnest blue eyes, unchanged in the character of their expression.

On her side, what did Maud see?

A face undeniably, strikingly, beautiful; but with its chief beauties all exaggerated, as it were, in some undefinable way. Veronica's figure was a little fuller than it had been. And the tendency to heaviness about her cheeks and jaw had slightly developed itself. Her thick eye-lashes were intensely—it seemed almost unnaturally—black. The semicircle of her jetty brows was defined with the hard precision of a geometrical line. Her glossy hair was pulled down in waves as accurate as those that edge a scallop-shell, so as to leave visible scarce a finger's breadth of forehead—an arrangement which at once lowered, and made ignobly sensual, the whole type and character of her face. Her cheeks and lips were tinged with a vivid red. Her once supple waist was compressed into a painfully small girdle. In a word, Artifice had laid its debasing hand on her every natural grace and beauty.

A "thing of beauty" painted, pinched, padded, yielded up to the low devices of coquetry, becomes not a "joy," but a toy, for ever. And then, with the contemptible and grotesque, what tragedy is mingled, when we see a living human soul prisoned behind the doll's mask, and fluttering its maimed pinions

against the base enamelled falsehood. Such a soul looked out of Veronica's lustrous eyes into Maud's as they remained gazing at each other, hand in hand.

"I would ask you to forgive me, Maud," said Veronica, "but that I think you are happy."

"To forgive you, Veronica?"

"To forgive my depriving you of your fortune," said Veronica, quickly. "That is what I mean. But you never coveted wealth."

Veronica had, unconsciously to herself, acquired the habit of assuming with complacent security, that whosoever refrained from grasping at an object, or repining at its loss, must be indifferent to it, and exempt from any combat with desire: like those savages who, modern travellers tell us, are incapable of conceiving any check to tyranny, save the limit of power to tyrannise.

"Don't speak of that dreadful money!" cried Maud, impulsively. "I hate to think of it."

Veronica dropped Maud's hands, drew back, and seated herself on a low prie-dieu. There was an air of self-assertion in her nonchalant attitude, and she toyed carelessly with a mag-

nificent diamond ring that glittered on her finger.

"Dear Veronica," said Maud, clasping her hands together as they lay on her lap, "it does indeed seem, as you say, like a dream. All that weary, weary time—Oh, my poor Veronica, if you could know how we missed you and mourned for you!"

Maud did not realise as yet how far apart they two were. Veronica's life during her absence from England was unknown to Maud. She imaged it confusedly to herself, as a time of disappointment, remorse, and sorrow. The two girls had always been very different even in childhood. But the courses of their lives had been parallel, so to speak; and as time brought to each character its natural development, they did not seem for a while to grow more widely sundered. But from the day of Veronica's flight—and doubtless for many a day previous, only that the divergence up to that point was too slight and subtle to be observed—the two lives had branched apart, and tended ever further from each other, to the end. Veronica was more sensible of this than Maud. She felt instinctively that the downward tending path she had been pursuing was not clearly conceivable to Maud.

Nor in truth had the latter any idea of the degrading flatteries, the base suspicions, the humiliating hypocrisies, the petty ambitions, the paltry pleasures, and corroding cares, ennobled by no spark of unselfish love, which had made up the existence of the vicar's daughter.

The one had been journeying through a home-like country, which never in its dreariest parts quite lost the wide prospect of the sky, or the breath of pure air; although the former might drop chill rain, and the latter might blow roughly, at times. The other had plunged into a tropical jungle: beautiful on its borders with gay birds and flowers; but within, dark, stifling, and deadly.

Veronica was conscious of a shade of disappointment on once more beholding Maud. She was disappointed in herself. She had been moved and startled by the first sight of Maud; but no tears had welled up from her heart into her eyes. No deep emotion had been stirred. She felt, with a sort of unacknowledged dread, that she had grown harder than of old. She had yearned for the luxury of genuine feeling, and recalled the sweetness of impulsive affectionate moments when she had forgotten, by Maud's side, to be vain and

selfish. But now the springs of pure tenderness seemed to be dry. She was uneasy until she could assert her grandeur, her success, her triumph. She wished to love Maud, and to be loved by her; but she also wished that Maud should be brought to see and to acknowledge how brilliant was her fortune, how great a lady the Princess de' Barletti would be, and how far above pity or contempt she had raised herself.

She had written, perhaps too humbly, to Hugh Lockwood, dashing off the note without stopping to weigh her words. If so, she must let them all see that she was no penitent to be pardoned and wept over, but a woman who had gained what she aimed at, and who understood its value.

She turned the flashing diamond round and round on her finger, as she answered slowly, "You *mourned* for me? Yet you did not answer my letter! Your mourning cost you little trouble!"

"Not answer your letter! Indeed, Veronica, I did. And on my own responsibility, and at the risk of offending—— at some risk. Did you never get my answer?"

The blood rushed into Veronica's face as she listened, and a suspicion of the truth

crossed her mind : namely, that Maud's letter had been suppressed by Sir John Gale. But she merely said, "Never. I never heard from any one at home, although I wrote several times. If you did write," she paused and changed her phrase after a quick glance at Maud's face : "since you did write, your letter must have gone astray in some way."

"Oh, Veronica, how cruel you must have thought me ! And yet—you could not, surely, think me so ? You did not doubt my affection for you ?"

"Oh, I alternately doubted and believed all sorts of things. Well ; it is over now."

"Dear Veronica, I have been told—Hugh told me of his interview with those gentlemen to-day. And we are both unfeignedly relieved and thankful to know that—that—that your claim will be established."

"Although you lose by it ! There was no doubt of the illegality of the will. Any court would have given the case in my favour. But I am not the less sensible," added Veronica, after an instant's hesitation, "of your generous forbearance. To have gone to law would have been very terrible—for every one."

"It should never have been done with my consent. Veronica, you have not asked—you

have said nothing about—Uncle Charles. Did you fear to ask? He is well, thank God.”

“I had heard that my father was alive and well from Mr. Frost. I hope he is also a little less obdurate against his only child than he was.”

Maud was shocked by the hardness of the tone in which this was said. Veronica’s manner altogether was unexpectedly chilling after the warmth of her first embrace, and the tenour of the note she had written.

“He has been very unhappy, Veronica.”

“I regret it; although *my* unhappiness seems to have been indifferent to him.”

“As you begged in your note that no word should be said of it to any one, we did not even tell Uncle Charles that——”

“Tell him? Is he here, in London?”

“Yes, dear. Did you not know it? Ah, I am glad you did not know it! That explains. If you had known he was here, you would have asked to see him, would you not?”

Maud’s eyes were full of tears as she spoke, and she took Veronica’s hand in both hers caressingly.

“Papa is here! You have been with him quite lately—to-day?”

“Yes. I left him at Gower-street. You

will not be angry, dear, when I tell you that, as you had made no sign, we had resolved—Hugh and I—to say nothing to your father about all the trouble, now past and over, until he should be at home again in Shipley. I am going back with him. And then, when we were quietly together in the old house, I should have told him.”

“Then papa does not know that I—that Sir John Gale is dead?”

“No; he has lived quite secluded from the chance of hearing it.”

“What brought him to town?”

Maud cast her eyes down, and her voice sank as she answered: “He came for Aunt Hilda’s funeral.”

There was a painful silence. Even Veronica’s egotism was dumb before all the considerations connected with those words. Presently Maud said, “But now you will try to see your father before we go away, will you not, dear Veronica?”

Veronica was agitated. She rose from her chair, and walked quickly about the room. Then she returned to Maud’s side, and, bending over her, kissed her forehead.

“Maudie, Maudie, do you think he has any love left in his heart for me?”

"Yes, dear Veronica; I am sure he loves you. Do not let that doubt stand between you."

"No; but I had intended something different. I meant, of course, to see papa. I meant to try to see him later, after I——. I believe it will be best that I should not see him yet."

"Will that be quite right, Veronica?"

"I must act according to my own judgment, and the judgment of those who have a right to advise me."

Maud looked at her in sorrowful surprise. Veronica's tone had changed again to one of haughty coldness. And who were they who had "a right to advise" her?

"I think," said Maud, gently, "that any one would advise you to relieve your father's mind as soon as possible. Think what he has suffered!"

"I will write to papa when he gets to Shipley," returned Veronica, after a pause. "And I believe that will be best on the sole ground of consideration for him. I do, indeed, Maudie. But now tell me about yourself."

"There is little to tell. My great good news you know already."

"Great good news? No.—Oh, stay. You mean your engagement?"

"What else should I mean?" answered Maud, while a bright blush came into her pale cheek, and her eyes shone, as she looked at Veronica, with bashful candour.

"Is it really such good news? He is a man of no family, and——"

"Veronica! Do you speak seriously? He comes of honest people, I am glad to say. But if he did not, he is *he*. And that is enough for me."

"You never cared about your own ancestry. But, then, Mr. Lockwood is quite poor."

"Not poorer than I am," said Maud. The next instant she feared that the words might be taken as a complaint or a reproach to Veronica, and she added, quickly, "I never expected riches. I always knew that I should be poor. I had no right to look for wealth, and, as you said yourself, I do not covet it."

"No; not wealth, perhaps. But look here, Maudie; I shall come and put myself at your feet as I used to do. I can talk to you better so. It will seem like old times, won't it?"

But the gulf that divided the old times from the new was forcibly brought to Maud's mind

by the fact that Lady Gale cautiously fastened the door that led into her bedroom, where her maid was sitting, lest the woman should enter the drawing-room and surprise her mistress in that undignified posture. Further, Maud observed, that Veronica, by sitting on a low stool at her feet, was not compelled to meet her eyes, as she had done when they had conversed together before.

Veronica's rich draperies flowed over the dingy carpet as she placed herself on the footstool, with her head resting against Maud's knees. Maud timidly touched the glossy coils of hair that lay on her lap. And her pale, pure face shone above them like a white star at twilight.

"Now, Maudie," began Veronica, in a low voice, that had something constrained in its sound; "I don't want to speak of the past year. You got my letter—thanks to little Plew, poor little fellow—although I did not get your answer. You know the contents of that letter. They expressed my genuine feeling at the time. Beyond having left Shipley without papa's knowledge, I consider that I have nothing to reproach myself with."

Maud gave a little sigh, but said nothing.

The sigh, or the silence, or both, annoyed

Veronica; for she proceeded, with some irritation of manner: "And I do not intend to be reproached by others. Evil and trouble came truly, but they were none of my making. I was the victim and the sufferer. I was entitled to sympathy, if ever woman was. But throughout I kept one object in view, and I have achieved it. I shall be replaced in my proper position in the world—in a position far loftier, indeed, than any one could have prophesied for me."

All this was inexpressibly painful to Maud. Instead of the trembling gratitude for deliverance from obloquy; instead of the ingenuous confession of her own faults, and the acknowledgment of undeserved good fortune, which she had expected to find in Veronica, there was a hard and hostile tone of mind that must be for ever, and by the nature of it, barren of good things. Maud was very young; she had her share of the rashness in judgment that belongs to youth. But, besides that, she had a quality by no means so commonly found in the young—a single-minded candour and simplicity of soul, which led her to accept words at their standard dictionary value. She made allowance for no depreciation of currency, but credited the bank whence such notes were

issued, with an amount of metal exactly equivalent to that expressed by the symbol.

That Veronica, in speaking as she did, was fighting against conscience, and striving to drown the voice of self-reproach, never occurred to Maud Desmond. She was grieved and disappointed. She dared not trust herself to speak; and it was the strength of her constant, clinging affection that made Veronica's speech so painful.

Veronica continued: "You must not think that I mean to be unmindful of you, Maud, in my prosperity. I know that in a measure I may be said to have deprived you of a fortune, although, had it not been to injure and cut me to the quick, that fortune would never have been bequeathed to you."

"Veronica! I implore you not to speak of that odious money! I had no claim to it in justice, no desire for it. For Heaven's sake let us be silent on that score!"

"No," returned Veronica, raising herself a little on her elbow as she spoke, and looking up at the other girl, with cheeks that revealed a deeper flush beneath the false colour that tinged them: "no, Maud, I cannot consent to be silent. I have made up my mind that you shall have a handsome dowry. It should have

been a really splendid one, if all the money had come to me. As it is, I dare say Mr. Lockwood will be——”

Maud put her trembling hand on Veronica's lips. “Oh, pray, pray,” she said, “do not speak of it! Dear Veronica, it is impossible! It can never be!”

Veronica removed her arm from Maud's knee, a dark frown knitted her brows for an instant, but almost immediately she said lightly, as she rose from the floor: “Oh, Maudie, Maudie, what a tragedy face! Don't be childish, Maudie. I say it must be. I shall not speak to you on the subject. Mr. Lockwood will doubtless be more reasonable.”

“Do not dream of it! You do not know him.”

“I am not in love with him,” retorted Veronica, smiling disdainfully; “but that is quite another thing!”

However, she suddenly resolved to say no more on the subject to Maud. She had another scheme in her head. She could not quite forget Hugh's old admiration for herself, and she meant to seek an interview with him. She would do no wrong to Maud, even if Hugh were to put aside for a few moments

the perfectness of his allegiance. But—she would like to assert her personal influence. She wished him to bend his stiff-necked pride before the power of her beauty and the charm of her manner. And in so wishing she declared to herself that her main object was to be generous to Maud, and to give her a marriage portion.

“Maudie, let my maid take your hat and cloak. This room is warm. We must have some tea together,” she said, going towards the door of her bedchamber as she spoke.

“No, Veronica, I cannot stay. And pray don’t call any one. I could take off my hat and cloak myself, if need were.”

“You cannot stay? Oh, Maud!”

“Hugh will come for me at nine o’clock. And I promised to be ready.”

“He is a bit of a tyrant, then, your Hugh?”

Maud shook her head and smiled faintly.

“Do you love him very much, white owl?”

The old jesting epithet, coming thus unawares from her lips, touched a chord in Veronica’s heart, which had hitherto remained dumb. She burst into tears, and running to Maud, put her arms around her, and sobbed upon her neck. Maud was thankful

to see those tears ; but for some time neither of the girls said a word. Then Maud began to speak of Hugh : to say how good he was, how true, honest, and noble-minded, and how dearly she loved. And then—still holding Veronica's head against her breast—she spoke of the vicar, of the folks at Shipley, and gave what news she could of all that had passed in her old home since she left it. She tried, with every innocent wile she could think of, to lead Veronica's thoughts back to the days of her childhood and girlhood, that seemed now so far, so very far away.

"I shall never see the old place again, Maudie. Never, never ! But, dear white owl, I have something to tell you. I—I—how shall I begin ? I found a relation in Naples : a cousin by my mother's side."

"Was she good to you ? Did you like her, dear ?"

"It isn't my fault, it is the fault of your stupid English language, if I was unable to convey to you at once that my relative is—is *cugino*, not *cugina*. Don't look so amazed !"

"I didn't mean to look amazed, dear Veronica."

"Well, this cousin—Cesare his name, is—is a Principe de' Barletti. Barletti, you know,

was mamma's name. And he is a good fellow, and very fond of me, and—I mean to marry him by-and-bye.”

“To marry him?”

“Yes.”

“And—and he is good, you say? and you really love him?”

“Oh, yes; I—I love him of course. And he is *devoted* to me. We do not speak of our engagement as yet; because—you do not need to be told why. But I shall assuredly be Princess de' Barletti, Maud.”

Maud's mind was in such a chaos of astonishment that she could hardly speak. It all seemed incredible. But she clung to the only hopeful point she could discern, and repeated once more, “He is good, and you do really love him, Veronica?”

“I tell you there is nothing in the world he would not do for me,” said Veronica, a little sharply.

Her soft mood was wearing away. Maud did not show herself sufficiently delighted: by no means sufficiently impressed. Astonished she was, truly. But not quite in the right manner.

“And—and is he in Naples now, your cousin?”

"In Naples!" still more sharply. "Certainly not. He is here."

"Oh! I did not know it. I had not heard of it, Veronica."

"I had no other male relative to whom I could look for due protection and support," said Veronica, with some bitterness.

At this moment a servant appeared, saying that Miss Desmond was waited for.

"I must go, dear. Indeed I must," said Maud, springing up. "And I have not said half that I wanted to say to you. I will write. Tell me where I can write to you."

Veronica dismissed the servant who was lingering near the door, and bade him say that Miss Desmond would come immediately. Then she kissed and embraced Maud, and told her that a letter sent to the care of Mr. Simpson would always find her.

"God bless you, Maudie! Thank you for coming. How you hasten! Ah, this Hugh is a tyrant! Cannot he be kept waiting for a moment?"

"Good-bye, dear Veronica. Think of what I have said about Uncle Charles! If you would but try to see him before we go. God bless you. Good-bye!"

Maud drew down her veil to hide her tearful

eyes as she went swiftly down the staircase. Veronica stole out after her, and looking over the banisters into the lighted hall saw Hugh Lockwood standing there: saw Maud running up to him: saw the face of protecting fondness he turned upon the girlish figure at his side: saw the quiet trustful gesture with which she laid her hand upon his arm, and they went away together. And then Veronica Lady Gale turned back into her own room, and throwing herself on her knees beside the chair that Maud had sat in, and burying her hot face in its cushions, yielded herself up to a tearless paroxysm of rage, and yearning, and regret. And the staid Louise was much surprised next day to find her mistress's delicate cambric handkerchief all torn and jagged—just, she declared, as though some creature had bitten it.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PARTNERS.

AFTER having been introduced to her at Bayswater, Miss Betsy Boyce called on Mrs. Lovegrove. The latter was a good deal flattered by the visit; which might have been inferred by those who knew her well, from the loftily patronising tone she assumed in speaking of Miss Boyce.

"Miss Boyce is a thoroughly well-connected person," said Mrs. Lovegrove, speaking across the dinner-table to her husband with much impressiveness.

"Ah!" said Mr. Lovegrove, who was engaged in carving beef for the family.

"It is curious how immediately one recognises blood."

"H'm!" murmured Mr. Lovegrove. "A little of the brown, Augustus?"

"No meat for me, sir, thank you! Vigil

of Blessed Ranocchius," returned the son of the house, austere.

"My papa was wont to say," proceeded Mrs. Lovegrove, "that his was some of the best blood in England—in a genealogical sense I mean. Not literally, of course, poor man, for he was a martyr to gout."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Lovegrove, whose interest in his dinner appeared to be more intense than that which he felt in his wife's respected parent.

"And in Miss Boyce," continued Sarah, in an *instructive* manner which was one of her peculiarities, "there is, despite eccentricity, an air of birth and breeding quite unmistakable."

"She seems a good-natured old soul," said Mr. Lovegrove. Whereat his youngest daughter, Phœbe, began to giggle.

"Levity, Phœbe, is low," said Mrs. Lovegrove, sententiously. "Miss Boyce gave me a terrible account of——" Mrs. Lovegrove broke off in her speech, and pointed downward with her finger in a manner that might have seemed to argue a startling allusion to regions usually ignored in polite society. But her family understood very well that she intended

to signify Mr. Frost, whose office was on the floor beneath the room they were sitting in.

"Eh?" said Mr. Lovegrove. And this time he raised his eyes from his plate.

"I mean of the wife—of the wife. Deplorable!"

"Well, then, she is a less good-natured old soul than I thought," said Mr. Lovegrove, gravely. "Mrs. Frost is her friend. I don't like that in Miss Betsy, my dear."

"Understand me, Augustus!" said Mrs. Lovegrove.

This phrase was frequently the preface to a rather long discourse on her part.

Her husband pushed his plate back, and began to cut his bread into little dice, which he afterwards arranged in symmetrical patterns with much care and exactitude.

"Understand me! I am not implicating Miss Boyce. Far from it. The deductions drawn from what she said are mine. I only am responsible for them. If too severely logical, I can but regret it. But I conceive they will be found to be correct when the facts are stated."

The facts, when arrived at, were not altogether new to Mr. Lovegrove. Mrs. Frost was extravagant. Mrs. Frost was selfish in

seeking her own pleasure and society in a circle which her husband did not frequent, and of which he disapproved. Mrs. Frost, who after all was but the wife of a respectable solicitor, had costly jewellery fit for any lady in the land! These were the main counts of Mrs. Lovegrove's indictment; and they were closely intermingled with much extraneous matter.

That afternoon Augustus Lovegrove said a few words to his father when they were alone together in the office.

"Do you know, father, I think that Mr. Frost ought to look after that wife of his a little more."

"Look after her! What do you mean?"

"I mean that he ought to curb her expenditure a little."

"I suppose he knows his own business best, Gus."

"Well, he certainly is very clever at other people's business. I don't deny that. But it may be that he is making a mess of his own. Such things sometimes happen. I did hear——"

"Eh? What did you hear?"

"Well, there are ugly rumours about the Parthenope Embellishment Company. And I

did hear that Mr. Frost had dipped pretty deep in it."

"Gus, I hope you have not repeated any such gossip! It is always injurious to a professional man to be supposed unable to keep his tongue between his teeth."

"I, sir? Oh no; you may be quite easy about that. But I thought I would mention it to you."

"I don't attach any importance to it, Gus. Frost is too clear-sighted and long-headed to burn his fingers."

"So much the better, sir," returned Augustus, quietly. And there was no more said at that time on the matter.

But Mr. Lovegrove thought of it seriously. Mr. Frost's proceedings had been by no means satisfactory to him of late. It was not that he had neglected the business of the firm, nor that he had seemed absent and absorbed in his own private affairs on occasions when matters pertaining to the office should have claimed his best energies. Nor was it that Mr. Lovegrove had accidentally heard that his partner had dealings with a money-lender of questionable reputation; nor the floating rumours that tradesmen had been dunning for their bills at the elegant little house in Bayswater.

It was not any one of these circumstances, taken singly, that made Mr. Lovegrove uneasy; but the combination of them unquestionably did so. And his wife's gossip respecting Mrs. Frost's extravagance, to which he would at another time have attached no importance, became disquieting as adding one more to the accumulation of other facts. Later on that same afternoon, as he was leaving the office, he saw Hugh Lockwood coming out of Mr. Frost's private room. On the day when Hugh had given testimony as to the hour of Lady Tallis Gale's death, Mr. Lovegrove and the young man had conceived a strong respect for each other. There had been the slightest possible acquaintance between them up to that time.

"Good day, Mr. Lockwood," said Lovegrove, offering his hand. He was not surprised to see the young man coming from Mr. Frost's room. He was aware of the old and close intimacy that had existed between the latter and Hugh's father.

"Good day, sir."

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Lockwood?" asked Lovegrove, struck with the expression of Hugh's face.

"Nothing, thank you. That is—to say truth, I *have* been put out a little."

And Hugh hastily shook Mr. Lovegrove's hand, and walked away with a quick step. Mr. Lovegrove stood looking after him thoughtfully for a moment. Then he turned, and went into Mr. Frost's inner sanctum. He opened the door without first knocking at it, and, as the heavy panels swung back noiselessly, he had time to see his partner before his partner was aware of his presence.

Mr. Frost was standing at the little fireplace with his back to the door. He was leaning with his elbow on the mantelpiece, and supporting his head on his hands. At a slight noise, made by Mr. Lovegrove, he turned round, and the other man almost started on seeing the haggard face that fronted him. Mr. Frost's forehead was knit and creased into deeper folds than usual. There was a dark red flush upon it, and it seemed expressive of intense pain of mind or body. His jaw hung, and his usually firmly closed lips were parted. His eyes stared wildly, and seemed hardly to take note of that which they looked upon. All this lasted but for a second. He passed his hands over his forehead, and said:

"Hullo, Lovegrove! I didn't hear you come in. Do you want me? I hope not, just now; for I have an appointment, and must be off."

"I did want to say a word to you. I can wait, however. Do you know, Frost, that you are not looking at all well!"

"Am I not? Well, I have a devil of a headache."

"Don't you do anything for it? You really do look uncommonly ill."

"There's no cure for these things but time and patience. I have been over-working myself lately, I suppose. Or else I'm growing old."

"Old! nonsense! You are—why you must be five years my junior, and I——"

"Oh, you are as sound as a roach, and as fresh as a daisy. But, my dear fellow, age cannot always be counted by years. I feel worn out sometimes. How I hate this ceaseless grind, grind, grind at the mill!"

"H'm! Well, for my part, I can never be thoroughly happy out of harness for long together. When we take our sea-side holiday every summer, I am always the first to get tired of it. I long for what you call the pounce and parchment."

"Happy you!"

"If you hate it so, why don't you retire and give up your share of the business to my Gus? You haven't a tribe of daughters to provide for. You must be rich enough."

"Rich!" echoed Mr. Frost. "Who shall say what 'rich' means in these days? And besides, you know, one always wants a little more."

He had by this time nearly recovered his usual mien, and spoke with the self-confident careless air of superiority which had never failed to impress Mr. Lovegrove.

"Aye, aye, one knows all that," said the latter. "Why, then, on the whole, you have—things have not gone so badly with you, eh?"

Frost gave him a quick and curious glance. Then his mouth stretched itself in a forced smile, to which, in the impossibility of attaining anything like spontaneity, he communicated an exaggerated expression of irony. He was conscious of this exaggeration; but his muscles were not under his own control.

"Oh yes, they have!" he exclaimed. "Things have gone very badly indeed with me. I haven't got what I want by some ten or fifteen thousand pounds."

"Ten or fifteen thou—by Jove!"

"Well, you know, Lovegrove, every man has his hobby. Mine has been to die worth a certain sum. I shan't tell you what sum; you would be shocked at the extravagance of my desires. Not having yet reached the figure I had set myself, I consider that I have the right to grumble. Consequently I do grumble—to the world. But," he added, with a sudden change of manner, "but between friends and partners, like you and me, I may say that on the whole—on the whole, my nest isn't badly feathered."

"I thought it was—I thought so!" replied Lovegrove, nodding his head with a kind of sober triumph.

"Ah, but I grumble!"

"Rich men always do. Only, if I were you, Frost, I wouldn't grumble too much!"

"Eh?"

"Folks might take you at your word. And as all the world does not know how rich you want to be—why—don't you see?"

Mr. Frost laughed a little dry laugh, and clapped his partner on the shoulder.

"Ah," said he, "God knows there is where-withal for plenty of grumbling without being poor. I'm harassed to death!"

"You have just had young Lockwood with you. I met him coming out."

"You met him! Did he—did he say anything?"

"Say anything? He said, 'Good day.' Oh, and he said, too, that he had been a good deal put out."

"Put out! He is terribly pig-headed."

"Is he? Well, I rather liked him. I thought he came out so well in that affair of proving the time of Lady Tallis's death. But I always thought you were such a great friend of his."

"I tried to be. I offered to get him a fine position with a company abroad. But there are people whom it is impossible to befriend. They won't let you."

"Dear me! Then he refused your offer?"

"Yes; I had given him a little time to consider of it. But he came to-day to—to say that he would not hear of it. And that not in the most civil terms, either."

"Oh! So that was what he had been to see you about?"

"Of course! Did he say that he had come for anything else?"

"Not at all. I told you what he said. But talking of companies abroad, Frost, I

wanted to say one word to you. I did hear——”

“Another time—another time, Lovegrove. I shall be late as it is. I have an appointment in the city;” and Mr. Frost pulled out his watch impatiently.

“Oh, well, I won’t detain you. Some day—some evening, after business hours, I should like to have a quiet chat with you, though.”

“Of course. Delighted. Whenever you like.”

Mr. Frost hurried off, and threw himself into the first empty cab that happened to be passing. As Mr. Lovegrove came out again through the front office, the senior clerk was putting on his hat and gloves preparatory to going home.

“Oh, Mr. Lovegrove,” said the clerk, “you were asking me about the bill of costs in *Bowcher v. Bowcher*!”

“Yes, I was. Has it been paid?”

“It has, sir. Their solicitors sent down this afternoon, and the bill was paid. You were not here. Mr. Frost took the notes, saying that he was going into the city this afternoon, and would bank them.”

“Oh, very well, Mr. Burgess.”

When the clerk had left, Mr. Lovegrove's face changed.

"Another instance of Frost's thoughtlessness," he muttered. "He takes money to the bank for the firm, and does not go to the city until after banking hours. It had much better have been sent in the regular way. I suppose the truth is, he is too busy growing rich on his own account. I should never have guessed that Frost had the ambition of being wealthy. I hope he won't burn his fingers with speculations in trying to grow rich in a hurry. But he certainly is a very superior man! A most superior man is Frost. All the same, when your clever fellow does make a mistake, it is apt to be a big one."

CHAPTER XII.

TROUBLE.

MR. FROST left his office in a state of pitiable disorder and anxiety of mind. It has been said that Sidney Frost hated failure; and still more the avowal of failure. He had originally involved himself in a web of dishonourable complications for the sake of winning the woman who inspired the sole strong passion of his life. And it was still his infatuated love for her that caused the greater part of his distress. What would Georgy do? What would Georgy say? How would Georgy bear it if—the worst should happen? These were the chief questions with which he tormented himself. And at the same time he well knew, in his heart, that she would be cold as ice and hard as granite to his sufferings.

His business in the city, and the rumours he

heard there, did not tend to reassure him. He drove to his home jaded and wretched. The headache which he had falsely pleaded to Mr. Lovegrove had become a reality. He threw himself on a sofa in the drawing-room and shut his eyes. But his nerves were in a state of too great irritation to allow him to sleep. Nor did the cessation from movement seem to bring repose. He tried to stretch and relax his limbs into a position of ease; but he ached in every muscle, and was as weary as a man who has gone through a day of hard bodily labour. Presently his wife entered the room. Care and toil, and anxiety had set no mark on *her*. Her peach-like cheeks were smooth and fresh; her eyes bright and clear; her hair was glossy, abundant, and unmingled with a thread of grey. She was dressed in a dinner costume, whose unobtrusive simplicity might have deceived an uninstructed eye as to its costliness. But, both in material and fashion, Mrs. Frost's attire was of the most expensive. Not a detail was imperfect: from the elegant satin slipper that fitted her well-formed foot to a nicety, to the fine old cream-coloured lace round her bosom. There was no jewel on her neck or in her ears; not a chain, not a brooch, not a pin. But on one round white arm she wore, set in

a broad band of gold, the famous opal, whose mild, milky lustre, pierced here and there by darts of fire, contrasted admirably with the deep purple of her dress. Her husband, lying on the sofa, looked at her from beneath his half-closed eyelids, as she stood for a moment uncertain whether he were awake or asleep. She was very beautiful. What dignity in the simple steadiness of her attitude! How placid the expanse of her broad white forehead! How sweet and firm her closed red lips! How mild, grave, and matronly the light in her contemplative eyes! She seemed to bring an air of peace into the room. Even the slight perfume that hung about her garments was soothing and delicious. If she could but stand so, silent and adorable, until her husband's eyes should close, and sleep come down upon them like a balm.

Thought is wonderfully rapid. Sidney Frost had time to see all that we have described, and to frame the above-recorded wish before his wife opened her handsome mouth, and said, in the rich, low voice, habitual to her:

"Sidney, that man has been dunning again for his bill!"

Crash! The sweet vision was gone, shattered into broken fragments like a clear lake-

picture disturbed by a stone thrown into its waters. The veins in Frost's forehead started and throbbed distractingly. He could not suppress a groan—more of mental than physical pain, however—and he pressed his hot hands to his still hotter brow.

"Sidney! do you hear? That insolent man has been dunning. You don't seem to consider how disagreeable it is for me!"

"What insolent man? Who is it that you mean?" muttered Frost, closing his eyes completely.

"You may well ask. Duns have been quite numerous lately," rejoined Mrs. Frost, with a sneer, as she seated herself in an arm-chair opposite to the sofa. "But none of them have been so insupportable as that Wilson."

"The jeweller?"

"Yes; the jeweller. And you know, really and truly, Sidney, this kind of thing must be put a stop to."

Frost smiled bitterly.

"How do you suggest putting a stop to it?" he asked.

"*I suggest! You are too amusing.*"

It would be impossible to convey the disdain of the tone in which this was said.

"Wilson came here, and saw you, and was insolent?"

"Very."

"What did he say?"

"How can I repeat word for word what he said? He declared that he must have the price of the opal bracelet. I happened to have it on, and that put it into his head, I suppose. He said, too, very impertinently, that people who cannot afford to pay for such jewels had no right to wear them. I told him that was your affair."

"My affair! I don't wear bracelets."

"You know that it is nonsense talking in that way, Sidney. I beg you to understand that I cannot be exposed to the insults of tradespeople."

"Can you not? Listen, Georgina. Tomorrow you must give me that opal when I go to business. I shall drive first to Wilson's, and ask him to take back the bracelet. He will probably make me pay for your having had it so long, but, as the stone is a really fine one, I think he will consent to take it back."

"Take back my bracelet!"

"It is not your bracelet. Do you remember that, when you first spoke of buying it, I

forbade you to do so, and told you the price of it was beyond my means to pay?"

"Take back my bracelet!"

"Come here, Georgy. Sit down beside me. Ah, how fresh and cool your hand is! Put it on my forehead for a moment. Listen, Georgy. I am in great trouble and embarrassment. I have a considerable sum of money which I—I—which I owe, to make up within six months. Six months is the limit of time allowed me."

Mrs. Frost shrugged her shoulders with the air of a person who is being bored by unnecessary details. "Well?" she said.

Her husband suppressed his indignation at her indifference, and proceeded :

"During that time I shall have to strain every nerve, to try every means, to scrape together every pound. I shall have——"

"I thought," said Georgina, interrupting him, "that your journey to Naples was to make your fortune. I have not yet perceived any of the fine results that were to flow from it."

"Matters have not gone as I hoped and expected. Still I do not despair even yet. No; far from it. I believe the shares will come all right, if we can but tide over——"

He checked himself, after a glance at her face. It was calm, impassive, utterly unsympathising. Her eyes were cast down, and were contemplating the opal bracelet as the arm which it adorned lay gracefully on her lap. Sidney Frost heaved a deep sigh, that ended in something like a moan.

"I don't know whether you are listening to me, or whether you understand me, Georgina?"

"I heard what you said. But I can't see why you should want to take away my opal. I never heard of such a thing. I little expected that such a thing would ever happen to me."

"Be thankful if nothing worse happens to you."

"Worse! What can be worse? I promised to wear the bracelet at Lady Maxwell's, on Wednesday, to show to a friend of hers, a Polish countess who boasts of her jewels. Lady Maxwell had told her of my bracelet, and had said, moreover, that mine was far handsomer than any single opal she had ever seen."

"You must make some excuse to her."

"What excuse can I make? It is too

bad!" And Mrs. Frost put her delicate handkerchief to her eyes.

Her husband remained silent; and after a little while she looked up at him in perplexity. She did not often have recourse to tears. But she had hitherto found them infallible in softening Sidney's heart towards her, let him be as angry as he might.

Presently the dinner-gong sounded. After a short pause, Mrs. Frost wiped her eyes, and said, in a cold voice, "Are you not coming to dinner, Sidney?"

"No; it is impossible. I could eat nothing."

"Why not?" asked Georgina, turning her large eyes slowly on him.

"Oh, you have not, of course, observed so trifling a matter; but the fact is, I am very unwell."

"No; I hadn't noticed it," she responded, with cool naïveté.

After an instant's reflection, it struck her that this indisposition might be the cause of her husband's unwonted severity. Sidney was often hot-tempered and cross, but such steady opposition to her wishes she was quite unused to. The opal might not be lost after all. She

went to him and touched his forehead with her cool lips.

"Poor Sidney, how hot his head is!" she exclaimed. "I will send you a little soup. Try to take something, won't you?"

He pressed her hand fondly. The least act of kindness from her made him grateful.

"Dear Georgy! She does really love me a little," he thought, as she glided with her graceful step out of the room. And then he began to meditate whether it might not be possible to spare her the humiliation of parting with her bracelet.

But soon a remembrance darted through his mind, which made his head throb, and his heart beat. No, no; it was impossible! Any sacrifice must be made to avoid, if possible, public disgrace and ruin. It would be better for Georgy to give up every jewel she possessed than to confront that final blow. Yes; the sacrifice must be made, for the present. And who could tell what piece of good luck might befall him before the end of the six months?

This was but the beginning of a period of unspeakable anxiety for Frost, during which he suffered alternations of hope and despondency, and feverish expectation and crushing humiliation, and during which he

was more and more delivered up to the conviction that his wife was the incarnation of cold egotism. He strove against the conviction. Sometimes he fought with it furiously and indignantly; sometimes he tried to coax and lull it. When he should be finally vanquished by the irrefragable truth, it would go hard with him. Of all this Georgina knew nothing. Had she known, she would have cared; because she would have perceived that when the truth should have overcome the last of her husband's self-delusions it must also go hard with *her*.

Meanwhile there was anxiety enough—with which Frost was intimately connected—at the house in Gower-street. Maud and the vicar were gone away to Shipley. The upper rooms were shut up, and the house seemed almost deserted. There had come to be a barrier between Hugh and his mother. It did not appear in their outward behaviour to each other. He was as dutifully, she as tenderly, affectionate as ever. But the unrestrained confidence of their intercourse was at an end. It must always be so when two loving persons speak together with a consciousness of a forbidden topic lying like a naked sword between them. Concealment was so intrinsically anta-

gonistic to Hugh's character, that his mother's aversion to speak confidently with him respecting the confession she had made once for all was extremely painful to him. And his pain, which was evident to her, only served to make her the more reticent. She thought, "My son can never again love me as he loved me before I wounded his pride in me. He is kind still; but I am not to him what I was."

Maud was sadly missed by both mother and son. Her presence in the house had been like the perfume of flowers in a room. Now that she was gone, Zillah often longed for the silent sweetness of her young face. Maud had been able to soften the touch of sternness which marked Hugh's character, and which had in past years sent many a pang of apprehension to his mother's heart as she thought how hard his judgment of her would be when the dreaded moment of confession should arrive. And now the confession had been made, and her son had been loving and forbearing, and had uttered no hint of reproach, and yet—and yet Zillah tormented herself with the thought that she was shut out from the innermost chamber of his heart. Hugh had lost no time in telling his mother of his interview with Mr. Frost. He related all the details of it

conscientiously, but without his usual frank spontaneity; for he saw in her face how she shrank from the recital; and in the constraint of his manner, she, on her part, read coldness and estrangement. She felt frightened as she pictured to herself the conflict of those two strong wills. Zillah, too, could be strong; but her strength lay in endurance less than action. And, besides, twenty years of secret self-reproach and the sting of a tormented and tormenting conscience had sapped the firmness of her character.

"You did not show him any mercy, then, Hugh?" she said, with her head leaning against her small pale hand, when her son had finished his narrative.

"Mercy! Yes, mother, surely I showed him more mercy than he deserved! I gave him six months' grace."

"Six months' grace. After five-and-twenty years of procrastination, how short those six months will seem to him!"

"And how long the five-and-twenty years seemed to you! But I told him the facts of the case plainly. The chance of buying the business I have set my heart on will remain open to me for yet half a year longer. If by the end of that time I have not given my

answer, the chance will be lost. He *must* repay the money he stole by that time."

"Stole, Hugh! You did not use that word to him?"

"No, mother, I did not use that word; but I should have been justified in using it."

"And how did he—did he seem? Was he angry and defiant, or did he seem secure of his power to pay the money?"

"He was greatly taken by surprise; but he has great self-command. And he is so clever and specious that I do not wonder at his having imposed on you. He tried to take a high hand with me, and reminded me that he had been my father's friend. 'Yes; a false friend,' said I. Then he was silent. I did not reproach him with violence. I could not have brought myself to speak even as harshly as I did, had he met me in a different spirit."

"Do you think he will really have a difficulty in repaying the money? I cannot understand it. He must be rich. Every one says that the firm is so prosperous."

"He recovered himself after a minute or so, and began to expatiate on the brilliant prospects of the speculations in which he is engaged. He waxed eloquent at the sound of his own voice; but I stopped him. 'Deeds,

not words, are the only arguments that I can accept from you, Mr. Frost,' said I. 'You have not now got a woman and a child to deal with. I am a man, and I shall exact my own unflinchingly.' Before I left the office, he offered me his hand, but I could not take it."

"You refused his hand? That must have cut him to the quick. He is such a proud man."

"So am I," retorted Hugh, dryly.

Zillah bent silently over her work. Hugh did not see the tears that brimmed up into her eyes. Hugh did not guess the sharp pain that was in her heart. He had so fully and freely forgiven whatever injury his mother's weakness had occasioned to him: he had such pity in his man's heart for the unmerited sufferings that this frail, delicate, defenceless woman had undergone from her youth upward, that it never entered into his mind how her sensitive conscience made her attribute to herself a large share of the contempt and disgust he expressed for Mr. Frost.

"I am at least an accomplice in defrauding my son of his inheritance!" said the poor woman to herself. "Hugh does not mean to

be unkind; but he must feel that all blame thrown upon Sidney Frost reflects on me."

The next time Mrs. Lockwood spoke, it was on an indifferent topic; and her son was hurt that she should so resolutely, as it seemed to him, shut him out from any confidential communion with her.

There needed some link between them; some one who, loving both, should enable them to understand one another. Maud might have done this good office. She might have served them both with head and heart. But Maud was not there, and the days passed heavily in the widow's house.

BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

A RETROSPECTIVE MEDITATION.

AN April day smiled and wept over Shipley. Wherever the clouds broke after a shower, the sky showed of a pale blue colour. Near the zenith floated white wreaths of vapour. Below them were long lateral bars of grey cloud stretching singularly straight across the horizon. They were vague and unfinished at the ends, like lines drawn by a soft lead pencil ; and they seemed of about that colour against the blue and white. A few early flowers peeped out in the garden borders. When the sun shone fitfully on the old yew-tree, it was seen to glisten with trembling diamond-drops of rain. A blackbird piped his sweet clear song from the shrubbery. Light and shadow

animated the flatness of the distant wold, whence came the many-voiced bleat of lambs blended into one sound. A solitary sheep cropped the short turf in St. Gildas's graveyard.

A young lady sat there on the low stone wall, looking across the flats towards Danecester. She sat so still that the grazing sheep came quite near to her as its teeth cut the short grass with a crisp sound in regular cadence. It was Maud Desmond who sat there on the wall of the graveyard, and whose golden hair was ruffled under her hat by the April breeze. She was absorbed in a reverie. She had been in Shipley now nearly a week, and she was mentally passing in review all the traits and circumstances she had observed during that time, which served to show what changes had taken place in the vicar's mode of life, and in the vicar himself, since she had left his house for her aunt's.

At first sight things had seemed little altered. But she soon found that there was a change in Mr. Levincourt which she had not observed in him in London. In the first place, he seemed to have broken completely the few relations he had ever held with his country neighbours in the rank of gentlefolks. That

was perhaps to be expected with a character such as Mr. Levincourt's ; it was natural that he should shun any possible occasion of reading in the manner, or even in the faces, of his equals that he had become an object of pity to them. But this was not all. It seemed to Maud, that after the first paroxysm of grief, and wounded feeling, and crushed pride had ceased, the whole character of her guardian had subtly deteriorated. He shrank from the society of his equals ; but, on the other hand, he appeared by no means to shun that of his inferiors. He would sit for hours enduring the baldest chat of Mrs. Meggitt, and women such as she. Maud was shocked and astonished to find him, one day, listening almost with avidity to some gossiping details of village scandal from the lips of Mugworthy, the parish clerk. The air of personal refinement which had formerly distinguished him, seemed to be disappearing under the influence of a slipshod laziness—a kind of slothful indifference to everything save his own immediate comfort. He was by terms querulous, almost lachrymose, and self-asserting. It was terrible to Maud to see his whole character thus lowered ; and she tried to believe that the change was but temporary, and that perhaps

she even exaggerated it in her affectionate anxiety.

During the journey from London, her mind was full of that which she had to reveal to him respecting Veronica. And she had dreaded the task, being entirely uncertain how he would receive it. But when she began to perceive the change in him, she conceived the hope that her tidings might at least have the good effect of rousing him from the apathy into which he seemed to have allowed all the higher part of his nature to fall, while he fed the daily life of his mind with contemptible trivialities. She had approached the subject one evening, when she and her guardian were alone together in the old chintz-furnished sitting-room after tea. Maud had quietly opened the pianoforte, and had played through softly a quaint andante from one of Haydn's sonatas.

The piece was chosen with the cunning instinct of affection. It was soothing and gracious, and yet, in its old-fashioned stateliness, it did not too deeply prove the spring of grief. The somewhat wiry tones of the well-worn instrument rendered crisply every twirl and turn of the brave old music under Maud's light fingers. In the very twang of the yel-

low keys there was a staid pathos. It affected the ear as the sweet worn voice of an old woman affects it, that thin quavering pipe, to which some heart has thrilled, some pulse beat responsive, in the days of long ago. Maud played on, and the spring twilight deepened, and the vicar listened, silent, in his arm-chair by the empty fireplace. He had taken to smoking within the past year. He had bought a great meerschaum with a carved fantastic bowl, and the colour of the pipe bore testimony to the persistency of its owner in the use of the weed. As Maud played softly in the gathering dusk, the puffs of smoke from the vicar's chair grew rarer and rarer, and at last they ceased. Maud rose from the piano, and went to sit beside her guardian. He was still silent. The influence of the music was upon him.

"Uncle Charles," said Maud, in a low voice, "I have something to tell you, and something to ask you. I will do the asking first. Will you forgive me for having delayed what I have to say until now?"

"I do not think it likely that you have need of my forgiveness, Maud. What forgiveness is between us must be chiefly from you to me, not from me to you."

"Don't say that, dear Uncle Charles. You touch my conscience too nearly. And yet, at the time, I thought—and Hugh thought—that it was better to keep the secret for a while. I hope you will think so too, and forgive me. Uncle Charles, some one is dead whom you knew."

The vicar gave a violent start. Maud, with her hand on the elbow of his chair, felt it shake; and she added, quickly, "It is no one whose death you can regret. It is awful to think that the extinction of a human life should be cause for rejoicing, rather than sorrow, in the hearts of all who knew him. But it is so. Sir John Gale is dead." The vicar drew a long, deep breath. His head drooped down on his breast; but Maud felt, rather than saw—for it was by this time almost dark within the house—that he was listening intently. In a trembling voice, but clearly, and with steadiness of purpose, Maud told her guardian of Veronica's marriage, of her inheritance, and of her actual presence in London. She merely suppressed in her narrative two facts. First, the will, which had made her (Maud) heiress to Sir John Gale's wealth; and, secondly, the late baronet's intention of defrauding Veronica at the last. She and Hugh

had agreed that it would be well to spare Mr. Levincourt the useless pain of these revelations. The vicar listened in unbroken silence whilst Maud continued to speak.

When she ceased, after a little pause, he said, "And she was in London! My daughter was within a few streets of me, and made no sign! She made not any—the least—attempt to see me or to ask my pardon."

His tone was deep and angry. He breathed quickly and noisily, like a man fighting against emotion. Still Maud felt that in his very reproach there was a hopeful symptom of some softening in the hardness of his resentment.

"She should have done so, dear Uncle Charles. I told her so, and she did not deny it. But I—I—believe she was afraid."

"Afraid! Veronica Levincourt afraid! She was not afraid of disgracing my home, and embittering my life. But she was afraid to come and abase her wicked pride at my feet, when she might have done so with some chance of bringing me—not comfort; no, nothing can cancel her evil past—but at least some little alleviation of the weight of disgrace that has been bowing me to the earth ever since her flight."

Maud could not but feel, with a sensation of shame at the feeling, that the vicar's words did not touch her heart. There was nothing in them that was not true. But in some way they rang hollow. How different it had been when the vicar had first discovered his daughter's flight, and afterwards the name of the man she had fled with! Then every word, every gesture, had been full of terrible rage, and grief, and horror. The vicar had been in agonised earnest then, no doubt. But now, as he spoke, it was as though he felt the necessity of assuming something that was not in his heart, as though he were ashamed of expressing relief at Maud's news, and made it a point of pride to excite his own wrath against his daughter.

Maud had yet more to tell him. She must reveal the fact of Veronica's engagement to the Prince Barletti. And she much feared that the communication of this fact would embitter her guardian still more. She could not see the expression of his face, as she spoke, and he did not interrupt her by the least word, until she paused, having finished what she had to say. Then the vicar murmured in an artificial voice, as though he were restraining its natural expression :

"Her mother was a Barletti."

"Yes. This gentleman is Veronica's cousin."

"Prince—Prince Barletti! Is that the title?"

"Prince Cesare de' Barletti. Veronica assured me that he is devotedly attached to her. He was a friend to her in her trouble abroad, and——"

"Barletti is a noble name: an old name. That wretch was a parvenu, sprung from the mud; a clay image covered with gilding."

There was a long silence. At length the vicar spoke again.

"And my daughter was in London, and made no attempt to see me. She allows me to learn this news from other lips than her own! My sorrow, my misery, my suspense, matter nothing to her."

"Veronica told me that she would write to you as soon as we got back to Shipley. She said that she believed it best, on the sole ground of consideration for you, for her to wait before addressing you until all should be settled."

"Settled!" cried the vicar, sharply. "What was there to settle?"

"Her—her inheritance; and—and the

proof of her marriage. She may have been mistaken in delaying to communicate with you ; indeed, I think she was mistaken ; but I do believe she was sincere when she professed to think it for the best."

The vicar rose and walked to the door. Arrived there, he paused, and said, "Until she does address me, and address me in a proper spirit, I shall take no notice of her whatsoever. None! She will still be to me as one dead. Nothing—no human power shall induce me to waver in my resolution."

Maud could see the vicar's hands waving through the gloom with the action of repulsing or pushing away some one.

"She will write to you, dear Uncle Charles," said Maud ; still with the same disagreeable perception that the vicar's words and tone were hollow, and with the same feeling of being ashamed of the perception. Then the vicar left the room, and went out into the garden. He relit his pipe, and as he paced up and down the gravel path, Maud watched his figure for a long time, looming faintly as he came within range of the light from the windows of the house, and then receding again into the darkness. Next day there came a letter for Mr. Levincourt from Vero-

nica. Maud recognised her large, pretentious handwriting on the black bordered envelope with its crest and monogram and faint sweet perfume. The vicar took the letter to his own room, and read it in private. He did not show it to Maud, nor communicate its contents to her further than to say that evening, just before retiring to bed: "It appears, Maud, that the present baronet, Sir Matthew Gale, has behaved in a very becoming manner, in immediately receiving and acknowledging his cousin's widow."

"Oh, dear Uncle Charles, the letter *was* from Veronica! She has written to you. I am so thankful."

The tears were in Maud's eyes as she clasped her hands fervently together, and looked up into her guardian's face. He put his hand on her head, and kissed her forehead.

"Good, sweet, pure-hearted child!" he said, softly. "Ah, Maudie, would to God that I had been blessed with a daughter like you! But I did not deserve that blessing: I did not deserve it, Maudie."

It was on all these sayings and doings just narrated, that Maud Desmond was pondering as she sat, alone, in the churchyard of St. Gildas.

CHAPTER II.

MISS TURTLE.

MAUD sat absorbed in a reverie that prevented her from hearing a footstep that approached quickly. Pit-pat, pit-pat, the step came nearer. It was light, but as regular as that of a soldier on the march. Presently, a shabby hat, with an erratic feather in it, rose above the wall of the churchyard, and little Miss Turtle, Mrs. Meggitt's governess, appeared, with a parcel in one hand and a basket in the other. She walked straight up to Maud, and then stopped.

"Good afternoon, Miss Desmond," said Miss Turtle, and looked into Maud's face with a demure expression, half sly, half shy.

"Oh, I—I did not see you, Miss Turtle. How do you do?"

"I startled you, I'm afraid. I hope you're not subject to palpitation, Miss Desmond? I am. Oh dear me, I am quite tired! *Would*

you allow me to seat myself here for a few minutes and rest?"

Maud smiled at the humility of the request. The wall of St. Gildas's churchyard was certainly as free to Miss Turtle as to herself. She made room for the little governess beside her. Miss Turtle first disposed her parcel and basket on the top of the rough wall, and then made a queer little spring—something like the attempt to fly, of a matronly barn-door hen unused to quit terra firma—and seated herself beside them. Maud was by no means delighted at thus encountering Miss Turtle. But she was too gentle and too generous to risk hurting the little woman's feelings by at once getting up to depart. So she made up her mind to sit awhile and endure Miss Turtle's discourse as best she might. They had met before, since Maud's return to Shipley. Miss Turtle and her two pupils, Farmer Meggitt's daughters, had saluted Maud as she came out of church on the first Sunday after her arrival at the vicarage, having previously devoured her with their eyes during the service.

"And how, if I may venture to inquire, is our respected vicar?" said Miss Turtle.

"Mr. Levincourt is quite well, thank you."

"Is he, really? Ah! Many changes since

we last had the honour of seeing you in Shipley, Miss Desmond."

"Indeed! If you did not say so, I should suppose, from what I have seen and heard hitherto, that there were, on the contrary, very few changes."

"Oh dear me! Mrs. Sack—you have heard about Mrs. Sack?"

"No. Is she ill?"

"Joined a Wesleyan congregation at Shipley Magna. Gone over to Dissent, root and branch! I am surprised that you had not heard of it."

Maud explained that Mrs. Sack's conversion to Methodism had not been widely discussed in London.

"And she's not the only one, Miss Desmond," pursued the governess.

"Indeed!"

"Oh, no, not the only one by any means. A considerable number of the congregation of St. Gildas's have gone over too. They say that the dissenting gentleman who preaches at Shipley Magna (he is not, strictly speaking, a gentleman either, Miss Desmond, being in the retail grocery line, and in a small way of business) is so very earnest. I hope you will not think I did wrong, but the truth is, I did

go to an evening meeting at their chapel once, with Mrs. Sack, and I must say he was most eloquent. I really thought at one time that he would have a stroke, or something. The glass in the windows jingled again, and I came home with a splitting headache."

"He must have been extraordinarily eloquent, indeed," said Maud, quietly.

"Oh, he was! But then, as I say, where are your principles, if you let yourself be tempted away from your church like that? Didn't you notice, Miss Desmond, how thin the congregation was last Sunday?"

Maud was obliged to confess that she had noticed it.

"Then, there's Mr. Snowe, junior."

"He has not joined the Methodists, has he, Miss Turtle?"

"Oh, no. Quite the contrary. But he is engaged to be married, I believe, and the lady hates music. Just fancy that, Miss Desmond, and he such a confirmed *amachure*."

Little Miss Turtle shook her head in a melancholy manner, as though she had been reluctantly accusing Herbert Snowe of "confirmed" gambling or "confirmed" drunkenness.

"Then," said Maud, "I am afraid we may

lose Mr. Herbert Snowe's assistance at the weekly practisings in the school-house."

"Practisings! Oh, dear Miss Desmond, the singing-class is nothing now; nothing to what it used to be. Mr. Mugworthy, he does what he can. But you know, Miss Desmond, what's the use of the best intentions when you have to contend with a voice like—there! Just like that, for all the world!"

And Miss Turtle screwed up her mouth, and inclined her head towards the distant common, whence came at that moment the tremulous, long-drawn ba-a-a of some fleecy mother of the flock.

Maud could not help laughing as she recognised the resemblance to Mr. Mugworthy's professional utterance of the Amen.

"Why, Miss Turtle," she said, "I didn't know you were so satirical."

"Satirical! Oh pray don't say that, Miss Desmond. I should be loath, indeed, to think so of myself. If I was satirical, it was quite unawares, I assure you."

Miss Turtle fidgeted with her paper parcel, tightening its strings, and putting it into shape. Then she peeped into the basket, as if to assure herself that its contents were safe. She showed no symptom of being about to

resume her walk, and there was a mingled hesitation and eagerness in her face every time she looked at Maud. These conflicting sentiments at length resolved themselves into a question that indirectly approached the main point to which her curiosity was directed.

“Ahem! And so, Miss Desmond, you don’t—ahem!—you don’t find our revered vicar much broken by all he has gone through?”

Maud drew herself up, and looked full at the speaker. But Miss Turtle’s wishy-washy little countenance was so meek and meaningless that resentment seemed absurd.

The governess’s straw hat was somewhat on one side; and so was the long ragged feather that adorned it, as it had successively adorned a long series of hats, beginning Anno Domini—but no matter for the date. Miss Turtle and her black ostrich feather were coeval in the chronicles of Shipley; for the good and sufficient reason that they had immigrated into Daneshire together. The long feather, wafted hither and thither by the capricious airs, and made lank and straight by the capricious showers of spring, drooped carelessly over the brim of the hat, and overshadowed Miss Turtle’s little snub nose, with

a shabbily swaggering air ludicrously at variance with the expression of the face beneath it.

"I told you that Mr. Levincourt was quite well," said Maud.

"And you, Miss Desmond," said Miss Turtle, timidly putting out the tip of her cotton glove to touch Maud's black dress, "you too have had a good deal of trouble."

"I have lost a dear relative and a true friend."

"To be sure. Oh dear me! Life is a shadow. *How* it flies! Don't you find it so, Miss Desmond? You have lost your aunt; a lady of title too," added Miss Turtle, with so comical an air of being shocked and surprised by this circumstance above all, and of murmuring reproachfully to the great democrat, Death, "How *could* you?—a person so well connected, and habitually addressed by mankind as 'my lady!'" that Maud's sense of humour conquered her sadness, and she turned away her face lest Miss Turtle should be scandalised by the smile on it.

Miss Turtle's next words, however, effectually sobered the mobile, dimpling mouth.

"Yes; you have lost your aunt—and *your* uncle, if what we hear is true."

Maud's heart beat fast, and she could not speak. Her nerves quivered in the expectation of hearing Veronica's name. It was not yet pronounced, however. Miss Turtle dropped her chin down on her breast, at the same time throwing back her shoulders stiffly, and infused a melting tearfulness into her habitually subdued voice as she asked: "And *have* you yet seen Mrs. Plew, Miss Desmond?"

"Mrs.—Mrs. Plew? No. Poor old lady, how is she?"

"She's pretty well, thank you, Miss Desmond. As well as she ever is. She is quite a character of the olden time; don't you think so, Miss Desmond?"

"Well I—I—I don't know. She seems a very good old woman," answered Maud, considerably at a loss what to say.

"Of course, Miss Desmond, you have had great scholastic advantages. And I shouldn't presume to—— But as far as Pinnock goes, Miss Desmond, I should say that Mrs. Plew was quite the moral of a Roman matron!"

Maud stared in unconcealed surprise.

"I should indeed, Miss Desmond," pursued the governess, still with the same tearful tenderness and a kind of suppressed writhing of her shoulders.

"I have *not* read the Roman History in the original. But, if Pinnock may be relied on, I should say that she quite came up to my idea of the mother of the Gracchi," which Miss Turtle pronounced "Gratchy."

There was so long a pause, and Miss Turtle so plainly showed that she expected Maud to speak, that the latter, although greatly bewildered, at length said, "I have always supposed Mrs. Plew to be a very kind, honest, good old woman. I cannot say she ever struck me in the light of a Roman matron. Perhaps, on the whole, it is a better thing to be an English matron; or we, at least, may be excused for thinking so. But the fact is, I never was very intimate with Mrs. Plew. It was my——"

Maud stopped, with a flushed face and trembling lip. She had been about to mention Veronica, and Miss Turtle pounced on the opportunity thus afforded.

"It was your cousin, or at least we all called her so, Miss Desmond, although aware that no tie of blood united you together; it was Miss Levincourt who was most intimate at the Plews'. Oh, yes, indeed it was! But of course all that is over. Higher spheres have other claims, have they not, Miss Desmond?"

And that which the proud and haughty have rejected, may be very precious to the humble and lonely, if it would but think so ; may it not, Miss Desmond ?”

A light began to dawn in Maud’s mind, which illumined the oracular utterances of Miss Turtle. Through the mincing affectation of the little woman’s speech and manner, there pierced the tone of genuine emotion. Still, Maud did not understand why Miss Turtle should have chosen to reveal such emotion to her.

Maud rose and held out her hand. “ Good-bye, Miss Turtle,” she said. “ Please tell Kitty and Cissy that I hope to see them at the practising next Saturday.”

“ Good-bye, Miss Desmond. I hope you won’t take it amiss that I ventured to enter into conversation with you.”

“ By no means ! How can you imagine that I should do so ?”

“ Nor look upon it in the light of a liberty ?”

“ Certainly not. Pray do not speak so !”

“ Thank you, Miss Desmond. You were always so kind and affable !” There was the least possible stress laid on the personal pronoun, as though Miss Turtle were mentally

have been so sorry to hurt your feelings. Of course you will see Mr. Plew before long, and then I suppose you—you will tell him, won't you? Of course he will know, so intimate as he was with the family; and always speaks with the greatest respect, I'm sure. When he knows something certain about Miss Levincourt—that is—I'm so used to the name, you see—we hope, his mother and I hope—or, at least, *she* hopes—for of course I can't presume to put myself forward—that he may get to be more comfortable and settled in his mind. We think him a good deal changed, Miss Desmond. His spirits are like a plummet of lead, to what they were, I do assure you. Good-bye, Miss Desmond, and thank you very much."

Maud walked home across the paddock and up the long gravel path in the vicarage garden, with a feeling of heaviness at her heart. She was half inclined to hate Miss Turtle, Mrs. Plew, and all the people in Shipley. But she resisted the impulse of irritated temper. What was her vexation compared with the sorrow and trouble inflicted on others? If Veronica could but have known, if she could but have foreseen!

As she thus thought, she entered the house

through the garden door, which stood open. She was going into the sitting-room, when she paused for a moment at the sound of voices within.

"Go in, go in, Miss Maudie," said old Joanna, who happened to be in the hall. "You won't disturb no one. It's only that poor creetur, Mr. Plew, a-talking to the vicar."

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CHAPTER III.

MRS. PLEW.

“AN illustrious house, sir!” the vicar was saying, as Maud entered. “A family renowned in the history of their country. My wife was a scion of a nobler stock than any of these bucolic squires and squires who patronised and looked down upon the vicar’s lady!”

Mr. Plew was standing with his hat in one hand and his umbrella in the other, beside the fire-place, and opposite to the vicar’s chair. Maud had already seen him several times; but looking at him now with the governess’s words ringing in her ears, she perceived that he was altered. There was the impress of care and suffering on his pale face. Mr. Plew was, on the whole, a rather ridiculous-looking little man. His insignificant features and light blue

eyes were by no means formed to express tragic emotions. He had, too, a provincial twang in his speech, and his tongue had never acquired a bold and certain mastery over the letter h. Nevertheless, more intrinsically ignoble individuals than Benjamin Plew have been placed in the onerous position of heroes, both in fact and fiction.

“How do you do, Miss Desmond?” said he.

Maud gave him her hand. His was ungloved, and its touch was cold as ice. The vicar had abruptly ceased speaking when Maud came into the room. But after a short pause, he resumed what he had been saying, with a rather superfluous show of not having been in the least disconcerted by her entrance.

“The family of—of—the late baronet have shown themselves entirely willing to receive her with every respect. Sir Matthew called upon her, and so forth. But she will have no need of people of that stamp. The prince’s position is in all respects very different to that of these parvenus.”

Mr. Plew stood bravely to listen, though with a dolorous visage. Maud was silent. The vicar’s tone pained her inexpressibly. It was overbearing, triumphant, and yet some-

what angry ; the tone of a man who is contradicting his better self.

"If," said Mr. Plew, without raising his eyes from the ground, "if Miss Le—if Veronica is happy and contented, and put right with the world, we shall all have reason to be truly thankful. She must have gone through a great deal of suffering."

"*She* gone through a great deal of suffering!" cried the vicar, with a swift change of mood. "And what do you suppose her suffering has been to compare with mine, sir? We shall all have reason to be thankful. *We!* Understand that no one can associate himself with my feelings in this matter ; no one ! Who is it that can put his feelings in comparison with mine !"

Maud glanced up quickly at Mr. Plew, fearing that he might resent this tone. But the surgeon showed neither surprise nor anger. He passed his hand once or twice across his bald forehead like a man in pain ; but he said no word. The vicar proceeded for some time in the same strain. Had any one ever suffered such a blow as he had suffered? He, a gentleman by birth and breeding—a man of sensitive pride and unblemished honour ! Had not his life, passed among stupid peasants

and uncultivated country squires, been dreary enough all these years, but this misery and disgrace must come to crush him entirely? Maud was trembling, and distressed beyond measure. Mr. Plew remained passive. Presently the vicar, who had been walking about the room, ceased speaking; and, throwing himself into a chair, he covered his eyes with his hands.

Then Mr. Plew turned to Maud, and said, "Miss Desmond, I am glad you came in before I went away; for I came chiefly to see you. I have a message to deliver to you from my mother."

He spoke quite quietly, only his face betrayed the agitation and pain which the vicar's tirade had caused him.

"A message from Mrs. Plew? What is it?" said Maud, trying to echo his steady tone.

"My mother hopes you will excuse the liberty she takes in asking you, but she is almost entirely unable to go out now. Very often she can't get as far as the church for weeks together. As she cannot go to see you, will you come to see her, Miss Desmond? It will be a charitable action."

"Surely I will, if she wishes it."

"She does wish it. Poor soul! she has not

many pleasures, and makes, of course, no new friends. The sight of your kind face would do her good."

"When shall I come?"

"Would you drink tea with her this evening? I will see you safe home."

"I don't know whether——" Maud was beginning hesitatingly, when the vicar interposed.

"Go, go, Maudie," he said. "I see that you are hesitating on my account. But I would rather that you went, my child. I shall be busy this evening."

Thus urged, Maud consented, promising to be at Mr. Plew's cottage by six o'clock. And then the surgeon took his leave. Maud was surprised to see the vicar shake hands with him, and bid him good-bye as unconcernedly as though no harsh or unpleasant word had passed his lips. But as she walked to Mr. Plew's cottage that evening with Joanna, Maud learned from the lips of the old servant that it was no new thing for her guardian to be what Joanna called "crabby" with Mr. Plew.

"Lord bless you, Miss Maudie, don't I know, don't I see it all, think ye? I'm old enough to be your grandmother, Miss Maudie,

my dear. And you mark my words, that little man, for all his soft ways, and bein' in some respects but a poor creetur, he's gone through a deal for the vicar. He has his own troubles, has Mr. Plew, and it isn't for me to say anything about *them*. But I do declare as I never see any mortal bear with another as he bears with the vicar, except it was a woman, of course, you know, Miss Maudie. A woman 'll do much for them as she's fond of. But to see his patience, and the way he'd come evening after evening, whenever his sick folk could spare him, and talk, or be talked to, and never say a word about hisself, but go on letting the vicar fancy as *he* was the worst used and hardest put upon mortal in the world—which the poor master, he seemed to take a kind of pride in it, if you can make that out, Miss Maudie. Lord bless you, my dear, it was for all the world like a woman! For a man in general won't have the sense to *pretend* a bit, even if he loves you ever so!"

Mrs. Plew received Maud with many demonstrations of gratification at her visit, and many apologies for having troubled her to come and spend a dull evening with a lonely old woman. Mrs. Plew was rather like her son in person, mild-eyed, fair and small. She

was somewhat of an invalid, and sat all day long, sewing or knitting, in her big chair, and casting an intelligent eye over the household operations of the little orphan from the work-house, who was her only servant. She wore a big cap, with a muslin frill framing her face all round, and a "front" of false hair, which resembled nothing so much, both in colour and texture, as the outside fibres of a cocoa-nut. Maud could scarcely repress a smile as she looked at the meek figure before her, and recalled Miss Turtle's grandiloquent comparisons. The surgeon was not able to be at home for tea. His portion of home-made cake, and a small pot of strawberry jam, were put ready for him on a small round table, covered with a snow-white cloth. The little servant was instructed to keep the kettle "on the boil," so that when her master should return, a cup of hot, fragrant tea should be prepared for him without delay.

"There," said Mrs. Plew, contemplating these arrangements, "that 'ill be all nice for Benjy. He likes strawberry jam better than anything you could give him. I always have some in the house."

Maud felt that it was somehow right and characteristic that Mr. Plew should be fond

of strawberry jam, although she would have been puzzled to say why. Then the old woman sat down with a great web of worsted knitting in her hand, and began to talk. Her talk was all of her son. What "Benjy" said, and did, and thought, furnished an inexhaustible source of interest to her life.

"Ah, I wish I'd known more of *you* in days past, Miss Desmond, love," which Mrs. Plew invariably pronounced *loove*. "Well, well, bygones are bygones, and talking mends nothing." Mrs. Plew paused, heaved a deep sigh, and proceeded.

"To-day Benjy went to the vicarage to ask you here, and, when he came back, I saw in his face that minute that he had been upset. 'Anything wrong at Shipley Vicarage, Benjy?' I said. 'No, mother,' says he. 'I'll tell you by-and-bye.' With that he went up-stairs into his own room. I heard his step on the boards overhead; and then all was as still as still, for better than an hour. After that, he came down and stood, with his hat on ready to go out, at the door of the parlour. And he said, 'There's good news for Mr. Levincourt, mother.' And then he told me—what I have no need to tell *you*, love, for you know it already. And as soon as he'd told it he went out. And do

you know, Miss Desmond, that for all he kept his face in shadow, and spoke quite cheerful, I could see that he'd—he'd been shedding tears. He had indeed, love!"

"Oh, Mrs. Plew!"

"Aye, it is dreadful to think of a grown man crying, my dear. But it was so. Though I never set up to be a clever woman, there's no one so sharp as me to see the truth about my son. If ever you're a mother yourself, you'll understand that, love. Well, I sat and pondered after he was gone. And I thought to myself, 'well now this one thing is certain; *she's* far away and out of his reach for evermore. And now, perhaps, as things have turned out so, that there's no need for any one to fret and pine about what's to become of her, it may be that Benjy will put his mind at rest, and pluck up a spirit, and think of doing what I've so long wanted him to do.'"

Maud knew not what to say. She felt ashamed for Veronica before this man's mother, as she had not yet felt ashamed for her. At length she faltered out, "What is it that you wish your son to do, Mrs. Plew?"

"Why, to marry, my dear young lady; I ain't one of those mothers that wants their children to care for nobody but them. It isn't

natural nor right. If my Benjy could but have a good wife, to take care of him when I am gone, I should be quite happy."

The recollection of Miss Turtle came into Maud's mind, and she said, impulsively (blushing violently the moment the words were out), "I saw Mrs. Meggitt's governess this afternoon."

Mrs. Plew had put on her spectacles to see her knitting, and she glanced over them at Maud with her pale blue eyes, half surprised, half pleased.

"To be sure! Miss Turtle. She's a very good young woman, is Miss Turtle. I'm sure she has been very kind and attentive to me, and it don't make me the less grateful, because I see very well that *all* the kindness is not for my sake. I suppose she spoke to you of Benjy?"

"Yes."

"Ah, to be sure she would! She's very fond of Benjy, is Miss Turtle, poor thing."

"Does—does Mr. Plew like her?" asked Maud, timidly.

"Oh yes, Miss Desmond, love, he *likes* her. He don't do more than like her at present I'm afraid. But that might come, if he would but make up his mind."

"Miss Turtle seems very fond of you, ma'am," said Maud, involuntarily recalling the "Mother of the Gratchy."

"Why I do believe she likes me, poor little thing. She talks a bit of nonsense now and again, about my being so noble-minded and devoted to my son. And once she said, that if she was in my place, she was sure that she could never have the sparkling virtue to give up his affections to another woman, be she ten times his wife."

"The—the what virtue?"

"Sparkling, I think she said. But my hearing is treacherous at times. But, la, my love, that's only her flummery. She means no harm. And she's good-tempered, and healthy, and industrious, and —— Look here, Miss Desmond, love," continued the old woman, laying her withered hand on Maud's arm, and lowering her voice mysteriously; "you have heard Miss Turtle talk. Any one can see with half an eye how fond she is of Benjy. She makes no secret of it. Now, if, whenever you've a chance to speak to Benjy—I know he goes to the vicarage pretty well every day—if you would just say a word for poor Miss Turtle, and try to advise him like——"

"Oh, Mrs. Plew, how could I do such a

thing? I am not old enough, nor wise enough, to take the liberty of offering my advice to Mr. Plew, especially on such a subject."

"But I don't want you to say it plain right out, you know. Just drop a word here, and a word there, now and again, in favour of Miss Turtle. Won't you, now? Benjy thinks a deal of what you say."

Thus the old woman prattled on. By-and-bye Mr. Plew's step was heard on the gravel path outside. And his mother hastily whispered to Maud a prayer that she would not say a word to "Benjy" about the confidence she had been making. Then the surgeon came in, and had his tea at the side table. And they all sat and chatted softly in the twilight. It was such a peaceful scene; the little parlour was so clean and fragrant with the smell of dried lavender; the scanty, old-fashioned furniture shone with such a speckless polish; the clear, evening sky was seen through window-panes as bright as crystal, and the little surgeon and his mother looked the embodiment of cozy domestic comfort. How strange it was, Maud thought, to consider Mr. Plew in the light of an object of romantic attachment. Strange, too, to think of his being a victim to hopeless love. He ate his

strawberry jam with as quiet a relish as though the beautiful Veronica Levincourt had never dazzled his eyes, or made his pulse beat quickly. Surely it would be good for him to have a kind little wife to take care of him!

When she was walking home through the Shipley lanes with Mr. Plew, Maud endeavoured to lead the conversation on to the subject of Miss Turtle's merits. Mr. Plew, however, replied absently and monosyllabically to her shyly-uttered remarks. At length, as they neared the vicarage, Mr. Plew stood still. He took off his hat so as to let the evening air blow on his forehead, and looked up at the transparent sky, wherein a few stars twinkled faintly.

"Miss Desmond," he said, "I have not had an opportunity of saying a word to you since this morning. I should not have mentioned *her* to you had not the vicar told me that you went to see her in London. It was very good of you to see her. God bless you for it, Miss Desmond!"

This was so unexpected, that Maud could find no word to say in reply.

"How was she looking? Is she changed?"

"Very little changed, I think; certainly not less beautiful."

"And did you see—the—the—man she is going to marry?"

"No."

"Did she speak of him to you? Look here, Miss Desmond, you need not be afraid to talk to me of Veronica freely and openly. I understand your kindness and delicacy. You think, perhaps, that it might pain me to hear certain things. But, indeed, to think that she will be happy, gives me great comfort. I am not selfish, Miss Desmond."

"I think that you are most unselfish, most generous, and it only pains me very much to think of your goodness being unappreciated."

Maud spoke with warmth, and a tear came into her eye. She was remembering the vicar's harsh, unfeeling behaviour in the morning.

"Oh, you praise me a great deal too highly," said Mr. Plew, looking at her with genuine surprise. "The fact is that I always knew Veronica to be far above me. I never had any real hope, though I—I—— Sometimes she liked to talk to me, and I was fool enough to fancy for a moment—— But that was not her fault, you know. She could not be held responsible for my vanity. When she went away," he pursued in a low voice, almost like one talking to himself, "I thought at first that

I had got a death-blow. For weeks I believe I did not rightly know what I was saying or doing. I suppose there was some kind of instinct in me that kept me from doing anything wild or outrageous enough to get me locked up for a madman. But at the worst, my grief was more for her than for myself: it was as true as God's in Heaven! I'm not a fierce man by nature, but if I could have got hold of—of that villain, I would have killed him with no more compunction than you'd crush a viper. But any man that marries her and treats her well, there's nothing I wouldn't do to serve him—nothing! All love is over for me. I know my own shortcomings, and I blame no one. But *she* was the first and the last. I know my poor mother wants me to marry. But it can't be, Miss Desmond. I'm sorry for her disappointment, poor soul! I try to be good to her. She has been a very good mother to me, bless her! If it had been possible for Veronica to come back free, and to have held out her hand to me, I couldn't have taken it. She could never be the same woman I loved any more. But neither can I love any other. I dare say you don't understand the feeling. I cannot explain it to my self. Only I know it is so, and must be so,

for as long as I have to live." Then suddenly breaking off, and looking penitently at Maud, he said, "Oh, forgive me, Miss Desmond! I boasted of not being selfish, just now, and here I am wearying you with talk about myself. I hope you'll excuse it. The truth is, I have no one that I can speak to about her. I dare not say to the vicar what I have said to you. And of course I don't put forward my trouble, when he has so much of his own to bear. I was led to talk on almost unawares. You listen so patiently and quietly. Here we are at the garden gate. Shall I come up the pathway? There is Joanna at the door. Good night, Miss Desmond."

Maud's eyes were so blurred with tears that she did not at first perceive that old Joanna had hastened to the door in order to be the first to give her a letter which she now held up triumphantly as Maud entered.

"A letter, Miss Maudie! One as you'll be glad to have!"

It was from Hugh. Maud took it, and ran to her own room to enjoy her treasure.

After a few fond lover's words of greeting, the first that her eye lighted on were these: "I have had a long interview with Lady Gale."

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

"I HAVE had a long interview with Lady Gale."

It was a minute or so before Maud recollected Veronica's announced intention of bestowing a marriage portion on her, and of speaking to Hugh on the subject. But Maud had warned her not to expect that Hugh would yield. And yet Veronica had persisted in her intention. It was, doubtless, in order to fulfil it, that she had sought Hugh. The further perusal of her letter confirmed this supposition. Maud might, of course, have satisfied her mind at once as to the correctness of her guess; but, instead of doing so, she had sat for a minute or two, letter in hand, vaguely wondering and supposing—a waywardness of mind that most people have occasionally experienced under similar circumstances.

"I told her that it could not be," wrote Hugh; "that I knew you had already answered for yourself, and that I must entirely approve and confirm your answer. Was not that right, dearest? She tried, when her first attempt had failed, to take a different tone, and to tell me that it was *right* and just that you should have a portion of the wealth left by Sir John Gale. She even said a word about the duty of carrying out her late husband's intentions! Think of that, Maudie! But I took the liberty of pointing out to her, that if *that* were her object, she must make over every farthing to you without loss of time, since it was clear that Sir John Gale had never intended that any portion of his wealth should be enjoyed by *her*. I don't think she is used to such plain speaking, and she looked mightily astonished."

That was all in the letter relating to Veronica, except a word at the end. "I forgot to say that her ladyship did me the honour to make me a confidence. She informed me that she was to be married to Prince Barletti almost immediately. For obvious reasons the marriage would be quite quiet. I saw the said prince; not an ill-looking fellow, although there is something queer about his eyes. Ve-

ronica told me that Sir Matthew Gale had consented to remain in town in order to give her away ! I had a strong impression that she was telling me all this in order that it might be communicated to you, and by you to Mr. Levincourt. Oh, my sweet, pure Maudie, what a perfume of goodness seems to surround you ! Only to think of you, after being with that woman, refreshes one's very soul."

Maud ran down-stairs, after reading her letter through, to communicate to the vicar that part of it which related to his daughter. But Mr. Levincourt was not within. It was past nine o'clock, yet Joanna said that it was very likely her master would not be at home for another hour or more.

"Do you know where he is?" asked Maud.

"I don't know for certain, Miss Maudie," said the old woman, dryly ; "but I'd lay a wager he's at Meggitt's. He hasn't been there yet, since you've come back. But for better than three months before, he's been there constant, evening after evening. They're no fit company for such a gentleman as master, farmer folks like them. I wonder what he can find in them ! But they flatter him and butter him up. And Mrs. Meggitt, she goes boasting all over Shipley how thick her and

hers is with the vicar. Good Lord! if men ben't fools in some things!"

"Hush, Joanna; you must not speak so. The vicar knows better than you or I either, where it is fit and proper for him to go."

But although she thus rebuked the old servant, Maud did not, in her heart, like this new intimacy. It was part of the general lowering, she had already noticed, in the vicar's character.

She sat down alone in the parlour to re-read her dear letter. There was but little news in it. Hugh was well; was working hard; and although he had not yet succeeded in finding the necessary money for the purchase of the business in Daneshire, he by no means despaired of doing so. His mother sent her fond love to Maud, and missed her sadly. The remainder of the epistle was full of words of the fondest and warmest affection. They were very precious and interesting to Maud, but would scarcely be deemed so by the reader.

It may as well be mentioned here that Maud was in ignorance of Mr. Frost's debt to Hugh. He had debated within himself whether he should or should not make her acquainted with it; and he had decided in the negative, perceiving that it would be impos-

sible to do so without revealing his mother's story, and that he conceived he had no right to do without her permission.

Maud sat and read, and re-read her letter. And then she took out the little plain wooden desk she had used as a child, and set herself to begin an answer to it. More than an hour passed thus. It was half-past ten o'clock, and still no vicar!

Maud at last began to think that Mr. Levincourt might prefer not to find her sitting up on his return. She had an instinctive feeling that he would a little shrink from saying to her that he had been passing his evening at Farmer Meggitt's. He had never yet, in speaking with her, alluded to the growth of his intimacy with the farmer's family. With this feeling in her mind, she resolved to write out the words about Veronica's marriage, stating that she copied them from Hugh's letter, and to lay the paper on the table, so that the vicar could not fail to see it when he should come in. Just as she had finished her task he returned.

"You up still, Maud!" said he. "Why did you not go to bed?" He spoke with a sharp, querulous tone, very unusual with him when addressing his ward, and made no allu-

sion as to where he had been. Maud was glad that she had written what the vicar had to learn. She slipped the paper into his hand, kissed his forehead, and ran quickly up to bed.

The next morning the vicar was as bland as usual, perhaps a trifle more bland than he had been for a long time. He asked Maud how she had passed the evening at Mr. Plew's, and seemed quite amused by her account of Mrs. Plew's anxiety that her son should marry.

"That little Miss Turtle, hey? Ha, ha, ha! How absurd it seems to look upon Plew in the light of an object of hopeless attachment! There is an incongruity about it that is deliciously ridiculous."

"I think," said Maud, rather gravely, "that Mr. Plew well deserves to be loved. He is very kind and unselfish."

"Oh, yes, child. That of course. That is all very true. There is a great deal of homespun, simple goodness of heart about poor Plew. But that does not prevent his being extremely comic when considered in a romantic point of view. But you're a wee bit matter-of-fact, Maudie. You don't quite perceive the humour of the thing. Which of

our modern writers is it who observes that women very rarely *have* a sense of humour? Well, why in the world don't Plew marry little Miss Turtle? Upon my word I should say it would do admirably!"

"I'm afraid—I think that Mr. Plew is not in love with Miss Turtle, Uncle Charles."

"My *dear* Maudie! How *can* you be so intensely—what shall I say?—solemn? The idea of a 'grande passion' between a Plew and a Turtle is too funny!"

"I think, Uncle Charles," said Maud, resolutely, and not without a thrill of indignation in her voice, "I do believe that, absurd as it may seem, Mr. Plew *has* felt a true and great passion; that he feels it still; and that he will never overcome it as long as he lives."

For one brief instant the vicar's face was clouded over by a deep, dark frown—a frown not so much of anger as of pain. But almost immediately he laughed it off, stroking Maud's bright hair as he had been used to do when she was a child, and saying, "Pooh, pooh, little Maudie! Little, soft-hearted, silly Maudie, thinks that because *she* has a true lover, all the rest of the world must be in love too! Set your mind at rest, little Goldie-locks. And—go whenever you can to that

poor old woman. It will be but charitable. Don't think of *me*. I have occupations, and duties, and—besides, I must learn to do without your constant companionship, Maudie. I cannot have you always with me. Don't mope here on *my* account, my dear child. And to visit the sick and aged is an act, positively, of Christian duty."

Again Maud had the painful perception of something hollow in all this; and the sense of being ashamed of the perception. The suspicion would force itself on her mind that the vicar purposely shut his eyes to the truth of what she had said of Mr. Plew; and, moreover, that in urging her not to stay at home on his account, her guardian was providing against her being a check on his full liberty to pass his own time how and with whom he pleased. Mr. Levincourt said no word about the contents of the written paper Maud had given him. And at the close of the above recorded conversation he rose and took his hat, as though about to go out according to his custom after breakfast.

"Uncle Charles!" cried Maud, in a low, pleading voice, "you have not said anything—did you read the paper I gave you last night?"

"Yes, oh yes, I read it, thank you, my dear child. I—I was not wholly unprepared to hear that the marriage would take place so soon. In—my daughter's letter to me—she said—justly enough—that there was no real reason for a very long delay."

Then the vicar sauntered out of the house, and down the long gravel walk, with as unconcerned an air as he could assume.

"He seems not to care!" thought Maud, with sorrowful wonder. "He seems to care so much less than he did about every thing!"

"Master *was* at Meggitt's last night, Miss Maudie," said Joanna, as she cleared away the breakfast things. This was not her usual task. Catherine, the younger maid, habitually performed it; and indeed, Joanna very seldom now left her own domain of the kitchen. But it seemed that on this occasion she had come up-stairs purposely to say those words to Maud. "Yes, he *were*," she repeated doggedly, provoked at Maud's silence, and changing the form of her affirmation as though she conceived emphasis to be an inverse ratio to grammar.

"Well, Joanna?"

"Oh, very well, of course, Miss Maudie. It's all right enough, I dare say. Bless your

sweet face!" added the old woman, with sudden compunction at her own ill-humour, "I'm pleased and thankful as you'll have a good husband to take care of you, and a house of your own to go to, my dearie. It was real pretty of you, to tell old Joanna all about it when you came back. 'Tis the best bit of news I've heard this many a long day."

Catherine coming into the room at this juncture (much surprised to see herself forestalled in her duty), began with youthful indiscretion to announce that she had just seen Mrs. Meggitt at the "general shop"; and that Mrs. Meggitt was as high and saucy as high and saucy could be; and that folks did say—— She was, at this point, ignominiously cut short by Joanna; who demanded sternly what she meant by gossiping open-mouthed before her betters. She was further informed that some excuse might be made for her ignorance, as not having had the advantage of having lived with "county families!" not but what she might have picked up a little manners, serving as she did, a real gentleman like the vicar, and a real, right-down, thoroughbred lady like Miss Maudie! And was finally sent down-stairs, somewhat indignant, and very much astonished.

Maud was pained and puzzled by all this. And her mind dwelt more and more on the change she observed in her guardian. There was only one person (always saving and excepting Hugh ! But then Hugh was far away. And besides her great endeavour was to make her letters to him cheerful ; and not to add to his cares), there was but one to whom she could venture to hint at this source of trouble.

The friend in whom she could unhesitatingly confide was Mrs. Sheardown ; and Maud longed for an opportunity of talking with her. But here again, things had become different during her more than twelve months' absence from Shipley. The vicar had withdrawn himself from the Sheardowns, as he had withdrawn himself from other friends and acquaintances. The captain and his wife still came to St. Gildas, but Joanna said it was nearly three months since they had set foot within the vicarage ; and the master never went to Lowater. Maud had seen her kind friends at church. They had greeted her on leaving St. Gildas with all their old warmth of affection ; and Mrs. Sheardown had said some word about her coming to Lowater so soon as the vicar could spare her. But they

had not been to the vicarage, nor had Maud thought it right to offer to leave her guardian alone so soon after her return. Now, however, she yearned so much for the sweetness of Nelly Sheardown's womanly sympathy, and the support of Nelly Sheardown's womanly sense, that she sent off a note to Lowater House, asking what day she might go over there, as she longed to see and speak with its dear master and mistress. A reply came back as quickly as it was possible for it to come. This was the answer :

DARLING MAUD. How sweet of you not to mistrust us ! We have not been to see you, dear girl, but the wherefores (various) must be explained when we meet. Come on Saturday and sleep. We will bring you back when we drive in to church the next day, if it needs must be so. Tom and Bobby send you their best—(Bobby amends my phrase. He insists on *very* best)—love. Present our regards to the vicar.

Ever, dear Maud,

Your loving friend,

N. S.

This was on Monday. Maud easily ob-

do you think, Miss Maudie, my dear, is at the Crown Inn there?"

"At the Crown Inn? What do you mean?"

"Why, Miss Veronica! At least Miss Veronica as was. And her new husband."

CHAPTER V.

PRINCE AND PRINCESS.

AT the Crown Inn in Shipley Magna there was intense excitement. Nothing like it had been known there within the memory of man : for, although the house boasted a tradition that a royal and gallant son of England had once passed a night beneath its roof, no one living in the old inn at the period of our story could remember that glorious occasion. Now there occupied the best rooms a foreign prince and princess ! And there was the princess's maid, and the prince's valet, who were extremely superior, and troublesome, and discontented. And there had arrived a pair of horses, and a gorgeous carriage, and a London coachman, who was not quite so discontented as the maid and the valet, but fully as imposing and aristocratic in his own line. And as if these circumstances were not sufficiently

interesting and stirring, there was added to them the crowning fact that the "princess" was a Daneshire lady, born and bred in the neighbourhood, and that the scandal of her elopement—and she a clergyman's daughter!—was yet fresh and green in the chronicles of Shipley Magna. What had they come for? The hunting season was over; and the hunting was the only rational and legitimate reason why a stranger should ever come to Shipley Magna at all. At least, so opined the united conclaves of stable-yard and kitchen who sat in permanent judgment on the actions of their social superiors.

"Mayhap she have come to see her father," hazarded an apple-cheeked young scullery-maid, timidly. But this suggestion was scouted as highly improbable. Father, indeed! What did such as her care for fathers? She wouldn't ha' gone off and left him the way she did if so be she'd ha' had much feeling for her father. She'd a pretty good cheek to come back there at all after the way she'd disgraced herself. And this here prince—if so be he *were* a prince—must feel pretty uncomfortable when he thought about it. But to be sure he was a I-talian, and so, much in the way of moral indignation couldn't be ex-

pected from him. And then, you know, *her* mother was a foreigner. Certainly Mrs. Levincourt had never done nothing amiss, so far as the united conclaves could tell. But, you see, *it come out in the daughter*. Once a foreigner always a foreigner, you might depend upon that!

Nevertheless, in spite of the opinion of that critical and fallible pit audience that contemplates the performance of the more or less gilt heroes and heroines who strut and fret their hour on the stage of high life, a messenger was despatched in a fly to Shipley-in-the-Wold, on the first morning after the arrival of the Prince and Princess de' Barletti, and the messenger was the bearer of a note addressed to the Reverend Charles Levincourt, Shipley Vicarage. The motives which had induced Veronica to revisit Daneshire were not entirely clear to herself. It was a caprice, she said. And then she supposed that she ought to try to see her father. Unless she made the first advance, he probably would never see her more. Well, she would make the advance. That she felt the advance easier to make from her present vantage-ground of prosperity she did not utter aloud.

Then there was in Veronica's heart an un-

appeased longing to dazzle, to surprise, to overwhelm her old acquaintances with her new grandeur. She even had a secret hope that such county magnates as Lady Alicia Renwick would receive her with the consideration due to a Princess de' Barletti. Lastly, in the catalogue of motives for her visit to Shipley Magna must be set down a desire for any change that promised excitement. She had been married to Cesare five days, and was bored to death. As to Prince Cesare, he was willing to go wheresoever Veronica thought it good to go. He would fain have entered into some of the gaieties of the London season that was just beginning, and have recompensed himself for his enforced dulness during the first weary weeks of his stay in England. But he yielded readily to his bride's desire; and, besides, he really had a strong feeling that it would be but decent and becoming on her part to present herself to her father.

Veronica, Princess Cesare de' Barletti, was lying at full length on a broad squab sofa in the best sitting-room that the Crown could boast. Her husband sat opposite to her, half buried in an easy chair, whence he rose occasionally to look out of the window, or to play

with a small Spitz dog that lay curled up on a cushion on the broad window-sill. Veronica gave a quick, impatient sigh, and turned uneasily.

"Anima mia," said Cesare. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing! Faugh! How stuffy the room is!"

"Shall I open the window?"

"Nonsense! Open the window with an east wind blowing over the wolds right into the room? You don't know the Shipley climate as well as I do!"

"How delicious it must be at Naples now!" observed Cesare, wistfully.

"I hope I may never see Naples again! I hate it!"

"Oibò! Never see Naples again? You don't mean it!"

"What a time that man is gone to Shipley!"

"Is it far to your father's house?"

"I told you. Five English miles. It is no distance. I could have walked there and back in the time."

"It is a pity, cara mia, that you did not take my advice and go yourself. I should have been delighted to accompany you. It

would have been more becoming towards your father."

"No, Cesare; it is not a pity. And you do not understand."

"I can, in truth, see no reason why a daughter should not pay her father the respect of going to him in person. Especially after such a long absence."

"I tell you, simpleton, that papa would rather himself have the option of coming here if he prefers it instead of my walking in to the vicarage unexpectedly, and causing a fuss and an esclandre, and—who knows," she added, more gloomily, "whether he will choose to see me at all?"

"See you at all! Why should he not? He—he will not be displeased at your marriage with me, will he?"

"N—no. I do not fancy he will be displeased at *that!*" returned Veronica, with a half-compassionate glance at her bridegroom. In truth Cesare was very far from having any idea of the service his name could do to Veronica. He was a poor devil; she a wealthy widow. Per Bacco! How many of his countrymen would jump at such an alliance! Not to mention that the lady was a young and beautiful woman with whom he was passionately in love!

"Very well then, mio tesoro adorato, then I maintain that it behoved *us* to go to your father. As to a fuss—why of course there would be some agreeable excitement in seeing you once more in your own home!" said Cesare, to whose imagination a "fuss" that involved no personal exertion on his own part was by no means a terrible prospect. After a moment's silence, broken only by the ill-tempered "yap" of the sleepy little Spitz dog, whose ears he was pulling, Cesare resumed: "What did you say to your father, Veronica mia? You would not let me see the note. I wished to have added a line expressive of my respect and desire to see him."

"That doesn't matter. You can say all your pretty speeches *vivâ voce*."

The truth was that Veronica would have been most unwilling that Cesare should see her letter to her father. It was couched in terms more like those of an enemy tired of hostilities, and willing to make peace, than such as would have befitted a penitent and affectionate daughter. But it was not ill calculated to produce the effect she desired on the vicar. She had kept well before him the facts of her princess-ship, of her wealth, and of the brilliant social position which (she was persuaded) was awaiting her. A prodigal

son, who should have returned in rags and tatters, and been barked at by the house-dog, would have had a much worse chance with Mr. Levincourt than one who should have appeared in such guise as to elicit the respectful bows of every lackey in his father's hall. People have widely different conceptions of what is disgraceful. Then, too, Veronica had clearly conveyed in her note that if her father would come to see her, he should be spared a "scene." No exigent demands should be made on his emotions. A combination of circumstances favoured the reception of her letter by the vicar. He was alone in his garden when the fly drove up to the gate. Maud was absent. There was not even a servant's eye upon him, under whose inspection he might have deemed it necessary to assume a rigour and indignation he had ceased to feel. There was the carriage waiting to take him back at once, if he would go. He felt that if he did not seize this opportunity, he might never see his daughter more. After scarcely a minute's hesitation, he opened the house door, called to Joanna that he was going to Shipley Magna, and stepped into the vehicle. It chanced, as the reader is aware, that his servants knew as well as he did, who it was that awaited him

at Shipley Magna. Joe Dowsett had met his friend, the head ostler of the Crown Inn, at Sack's farm, that morning, and the arrival of the prince and princess had been fully discussed between them. But of this the vicar was in happy ignorance, as he was driven along the winding road across "the hills" to Shipley.

"Here is our messenger returned!" exclaimed Barletti, suddenly, as from his post at the window he perceived the fly jingling up the High-street. "It is he! I recognise the horse by his fatness. Sommi dei, is he fat, that animal! And I think I see some one inside the carriage. Yes—yes! It is, it must be your father!"

Veronica sprang from the sofa, and ran towards a door that led into the adjoining chamber.

"Stay, dearest; that is not the way!" cried Cesare. "Come, here is the door of the corridor; come, we will go down and meet him together."

But that had been by no means Veronica's intention. In the first agitation of learning her father's approach, she had started up with simply an instinctive, unreasoning impulse to run away. At Cesare's words she strove to

command herself, and sank down again in a sitting posture on the sofa.

"No—no—no, Cesare," she said, in a low, breathless tone. "I—I was crazy to think of such a thing! It would never do to meet papa in the inn-yard before all those people. He would not like it. Stay with me, Cesare."

She took his hand in hers, and held it with an almost convulsively tight grasp. Thus they waited silently, hand in hand. Her emotion had affected Cesare, and he had turned quite pale. It was probably not more than three minutes from the moment of Cesare's first seeing the fly that they waited thus. But it seemed to Veronica as though a long period had elapsed between that moment and the opening of the sitting-room door.

"The vicar of Shipley," announced the prince's English valet, who condescended to act on occasion as groom of the chambers.

"Papa!"

"My dear child! My dear Veronica!"

It was over. The meeting looked forward to with such mingled feelings had taken place, almost without a tear being shed. The vicar's eyes were moistened a little. Veronica did not cry, but she was as pale as the false colour on her cheeks would let her be, and she

trembled, and her heart beat fast; but she alone knew this, and she strove to hide it. She had put her arms round her father's neck and kissed him. And he had held her for a moment in his embrace. Then they sat down side by side on the sofa. And then they perceived, for the first time, that Prince Cesare de' Barletti, who had retired to the window, was crying in a quite unconcealed manner, and noisily using a large white pocket-handkerchief which filled the whole room with an odour as of a perfumer's shop.

"Cesare," called Veronica, "come hither. Let me present you to my father."

Cesare wiped his eyes; put the odoriferous handkerchief into his pocket, and advanced with extended hands to the vicar. He would have embraced him, but he conceived that that would have been a solecism in English manners; and Cesare flattered himself that although his knowledge of the language was as yet imperfect, he had very happily acquired the outward bearing of an Englishman.

"It is a moment I have long desired," said he, shaking the vicar's right hand between both his. "The father of my beloved wife may be assured of my truest respect and affection."

There was a real charm and grace in the way in which Cesare said these words. It was entirely free from awkwardness or constraint; and uttered in his native Italian, the words themselves appeared thoroughly simple and natural.

Mr. Levincourt was favourably impressed by his son-in-law at once. He warmly returned the grasp of Cesare's hand; and said to his daughter, "Tell Prince Barletti that although my Italian has grown rusty on my tongue, I fully understand what he says, and thank him for it."

"Oh, Cesare speaks a little English," returned Veronica, smiling. She was growing more at her ease every moment. The reaction from her brief trepidation and depression sent her spirits up rapidly. She recovered herself sufficiently to observe her father's face closely, and to think, "Papa is really a very handsome man still. I wonder if Cesare expected to see a person of such distinguished appearance." Then in the next instant she noticed that the vicar's dress was decidedly less careful than of yore; and she perceived in his bearing—in the negligence of his attitude—some traces of that subtle, general deterioration which it had so pained Maud to

discover. But she was seeing him under a better aspect than any Maud had yet witnessed since her return to Shipley. The vicar was not so far changed from his former self as to be indifferent to the impression he was making on Prince Barletti. They all three sat and talked much as they might have done had Veronica parted from her father to go on a wedding tour with her bridegroom, and was meeting him for the first time after a happy honeymoon. They sat and talked almost as though such a being as Sir John Gale had never crossed the threshold of Shipley vicarage. In Cesare, this came about naturally enough. But Veronica, despite her languid princess air, was ceaselessly on the watch to turn his indiscreet tongue from dangerous topics.

And so things went on with delightful smoothness. The vicar, being pressed, consented to remain and dine with his daughter and son-in-law, and to be driven home by them in the evening. Down-stairs the united conclaves were greatly interested in this new act of the drama, and criticised the performers in it with considerable vivacity.

CHAPTER VI.

HOME, SWEET HOME!

"AND how long do you purpose remaining here?" asked the vicar, addressing his son-in-law, as they sat at table. "I presume this is merely on the way to some other place. Do you go northward? It is too early for the Lakes, and still more so for the Highlands."

Cesare looked at his wife.

"Well, how long we remain will depend on several things," answered Veronica. "We were not en route for any special destination. I did not know that Shipley Magna *could* be en route for any place. No; we came down here to see you, papa."

"Yet you have had a carriage sent down, you say?"

"Ah, yes; an' 'orses," put in Cesare, "I-a, want-a, to guide-a."

"Don't be alarmed, papa. Cesare is not

going to drive us this evening. We have a pretty good coachman, I believe."

"Then you *had* some intention of making a stay here?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so. But really I don't think I ever have what you would call an intention. That suggests such a vigorous operation of the mind. We shall stay if it suits us. If not—not; don't you know?"

Veronica uttered these words with the most exaggerated assumption of languid fine-ladyism. The time had been when such an affectation on her part would not have escaped some caustic reproof from the vicar's tongue. As it was, he merely looked at her in silence. Cesare followed his glance, and shook his head compassionately. "Ah," said he, in his own language, "she is not strong, our dearest Veronica. She has certain moments so languid, so depressed."

The vicar was for a second uncertain whether Barletti spoke ironically or in good faith. But there was no mistaking the simplicity of his face.

"Is she not strong?" said the vicar. "She used to be very healthy."

"Oh, I am quite well, papa. Only I get *so* tired," drawled out the princess.

Her father looked at her again more attentively. Her skin was so artificially coloured that there was small indication of the real state of her health to be drawn from that. But the dark rings round her eyes were natural. Her figure had not grown thinner, but her hands seemed wasted, and there was a slight puffy fullness about her cheeks and jaw.

"She does *not* look very strong," said the vicar, "and—I have observed that she eats nothing."

"No! Is it not true? I have told her so, have I not, mia cara? You are right, Signor Vicario; she eats nothing. More champagne? Don't take it. Who knows what stuff it is made of?"

"Cesare, I beg you will not be absurd," returned Veronica, with a frown, and an angry flash of her eyes. "It keeps me up. I require stimulants. Don't you remember the doctor said I required stimulants?"

"Apropos of doctors," said the vicar, with an amused smile, "you have not asked after little Plew."

"Oh, poor little Plew! What is he doing?" asked Veronica. She had subsided again into her nonchalant air, temporarily interrupted by

the flash of temper, and asked after Mr. Plew with the tolerant condescension of a superior being.

"What-a is Ploo?" demanded the prince.

The vicar explained. And, being cheered by a good dinner and a glass of very fair sherry (he had prudently eschewed the Crown champagne) into something as near jollity as he ever approached, for the vicar was a man who could smile, but rarely laughed, he treated them to a burlesque account of Miss Turtle's passion.

"How immensely comic!" said Veronica, slowly. She had reached such a point of princess-ship that she could barely take the trouble to part her red lips in a smile at the expense of these lower creatures. Nevertheless there was in her heart a movement of very vulgar and plebeian jealousy. Jealousy! Jealousy of Mr. Plew? Jealousy of power; jealousy of admiration; jealousy of the hold she had over this man; jealousy, yes, jealousy of the possibility of the village surgeon comparing her to her disadvantage with any other woman, and giving to that other something that, with all his blind idolatry of old days, she felt he had *never* given to her—sincere and manly respect. She would not have him

feel for any woman what an honest man feels for his honest wife.

"I suppose," she said, after a pause, "that poor little Plew will marry her."

"Oh, I suppose so," returned the vicar, carelessly. "It would do very well. Maud thinks he will not; but that's nonsense. Plew is not very enterprising or ardent, but if the lady will but persevere he'll yield: not a doubt of it!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Veronica, toying with her bracelet, and looking as though she were ineffably weary of the whole subject. In that moment she was foreseeing a gleam of wished-for excitement in Shipley.

After dinner—which had been expressly ordered a couple of hours earlier than usual—they all drove along the winding turf-bordered road towards Shipley-in-the-Wold. It was a clear spring evening. The distant prospect melted away into faint blues and greys. A shower had hung bright drops on the budding hawthorn hedges. The air blew sweet and fresh across the rolling wold. Not one of the three persons who occupied Prince Cesare de' Barletti's handsome carriage was specially pervious to the influences of such a scene and hour. But they all, from whatso-

ever motive, kept silence for a time. Barletti enjoyed the smooth easy motion of the well-hung vehicle. But he thought the landscape around him very dull. And besides he was the victim of an unfulfilled ambition to mount up on the high box, and drive. He was speculating on the chances of Veronica's permitting him to do so as they drove back from the vicarage. But then even if she consented, what was to become of Dickinson, his man, who was seated beside the coachman? He could not be put into the carriage with his mistress, that was clear. To be sure the distance was not very great. He might—he might perhaps, walk back! But even as this bold idea passed through Cesare's mind, he dismissed it, as knowing it to appertain to the category of day-dreams. Dickinson was a very oppressive personage to his master. His gravity, severity, and machine-like imperturbability kept poor Cesare in subjection. Not that Cesare had not a sufficient strain of the grand seigneur in him to have asserted his own will and pleasure, with perfect disregard to the opinion of any servant of his own nation, but he relied on Dickinson to assist him in his endeavour to acquire the tone of English manners.

His first rebuff from Dickinson had been in the matter of a pair of drab gaiters which the prince had bought on his own responsibility. These he had put on to sally forth in at St. Leonard's, whither he had gone with his bride immediately on his marriage; and in conjunction with a tartan neck-cloth fastened by a gold fox's head with garnet eyes, they had given him, he flattered himself, the air of a distinguished member of the Jockey Club at the very least. Dickinson's disapproval of the gaiters was, however, so pronounced, that Cesare reluctantly abandoned them. And from that hour his valet's iron rule over his wardrobe was established.

On these and such-like weighty matters was Prince Barletti pondering as he rolled along in his carriage. Veronica leaned back in an elaborately easy attitude, and while apparently steeped in elegant languor, was keeping a sharp look-out in case her secret desire of meeting some old acquaintance on the road should chance to be fulfilled. The vicar was busy with his own private thoughts and speculations. The road was quite deserted until they neared the village of Shipley. Then the noise of the passing carriage attracted one or two faces to the cottage windows, and a dog

or two barked violently at the heels of the horses. Such of the denizens of Shipley as saw Prince Barletti's equipage stared at it until it was out of sight. It was all so bright and showy, and brand new. Very different from the solid, well-preserved vehicles in which most of the neighbouring gentry were seen to drive about the country. There was a great blazon of arms on the shining panels. The coachman's livery was of outlandish gorgeousness, and the harness glittered with silver. A vivid recollection darted into Veronica's mind, as the carriage dashed through the village street, of that moonlit night when the jingling old fly from the Crown Inn, which she and her father occupied, had drawn aside to let Dr. Begbie's carriage pass, as they drove home from the dinner party at Lowater House.

"Who is that respectable signora?" asked Cesare of his wife, at the same time raising his hat and executing a bow with much suavity.

"Eh? Where? What respectable signora?"

"There—that rotund, blooming English matron. What a freshness on her cheeks!"

It was Mrs. Meggitt to whom Barletti alluded. The worthy woman's cheeks were

indeed all a-glow with excitement. She stood by the wayside, nodding and smiling to the vicar, who slightly—one might almost say furtively—returned her salute. From behind the ample shelter of Mrs. Meggitt's shoulder appeared the pale, pinched countenance of Miss Turtle. Her eyes saw nothing but Veronica. Their wide, steady stare took in every detail of the beauty's rich garments: the delicate, costly little bonnet sitting so lightly on a complicated mass of jetty coils and plaits; the gleam of a chain around her neck; the perfection of her grey gloves; the low, elaborate waves of hair on her forehead; and be sure that Miss Turtle did not fail to observe that the princess was painted!

"Cesare! Per carità! What are you doing? Pray, be quiet!" exclaimed Veronica, quickly, as she saw her lord about to pull off his hat once more.

"Ma come? Cosa c'è? Why may I not bow to the respectable matron?"

"Nonsense; be quiet! She is a farmer's wife. And I must say, I never saw a more presumptuous manner of saluting her clergyman. What has come to the woman, papa? She is nodding and grinning like a ridiculous old china image!"

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"She did not nod and grin at *you*, Veronica," returned the vicar, with unexpected heat, and in a flurried, quick way. "I have a great liking and—and—respect—a great respect—for Mrs. Meggitt. I have received kindness and comfort from her and hers when I was deserted and alone. Yes, quite lonely and miserable. And let me tell you, that it would have done you no harm to return her salute. If you expect Shipley people to kootoo to you, you are mistaken. Your husband, who was to the manner born, understands how to play prince a great deal better than you have yet learned to act princess!"

Veronica was too genuinely surprised to utter a word. But silence was in keeping with the tone of disdainful nonchalance she had lately chosen to assume, and eked out by a slight raising of the brows, and a still slighter shrug of the shoulders, it was sufficiently expressive.

Cesare did not understand all that had passed between the father and daughter, and indeed had paid but slight attention to it, being occupied with gazing after Mrs. Meggitt. He was delighted with the good lady's appearance as approaching more nearly than anything he had yet seen, to his ideal of the

colour, form, and size of a thorough-bred, average English-woman.

He had not got over his fit of admiration when the carriage arrived at the corner of Bassett's-lane, which, as the reader knows, was skirted on one side by the wall of the vicarage garden. The coachman pulled up his horses, and Dickinson, hat in hand, looked down into the carriage for orders.

"Which way is he to take, your 'Ighness?" demanded Dickinson.

Suddenly it rushed upon Veronica that she could not bear to be driven up Bassett's-lane to the back door of the garden. She had felt no emotion, or scarcely any, so far, on revisiting her old home. But the events of a certain February gloaming were so indissolubly associated in her memory with that one special spot that she shuddered to approach it. The whole scene was instantly present to her mind—the chill murky sky, the heap of flint stones, the carter holding the trembling horse, and on the ground Joe Dowsett with that unconscious, scarlet-coated, mud-bespattered figure in his arms!

She sank back shivering into a corner of the carriage, and said in a voice little louder than a whisper, "Not that way, papa!" The

vicar partly understood her feeling. But he could not understand why that spot, and that alone, out of all the numerous places and persons connected with the past, that she had hitherto seen, should so move her. She herself could not have told why; but it indubitably was so.

Cesare had marked her changing face and voice. He leaned forward, and took her hand. "Cara mia diletta," he murmured, "you are chill! This evening air is too sharp for you. I saw you shiver! Did not your maid put a shawl into the carriage? Let me wrap you more warmly."

Veronica accepted his assumption, and suffered herself to be enfolded in the shawl. The vicar meanwhile explained to Dickinson the road which the coachman must follow to approach the vicarage by the side of St. Gildas.

"You will see a specimen of our ancient church architecture," said Mr. Levincourt to his son-in-law in laboured and highly uncolloquial Italian.

Cesare professed himself much interested. But when his eyes lighted on the squat tower of the old church, and the bleak barren graveyard, he stared around him as though he had

in some way missed the object he was bidden to look at, and as though *that* could not surely be the "specimen of ancient church architecture."

"Why, there is Maudie on the look-out for me," said the vicar. "How surprised she will be! And who is that with her? I declare it is—yes, positively it is Mr. Plew!"

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. PLEW SPEAKS HER MIND.

MAUD's visit to Lowater took place as arranged. Only instead of remaining merely a day with the Sheardowns she stayed in their house a week. Mrs. Sheardown had strongly urged, almost insisted on, this.

"You have not now the plea that you cannot leave the vicar to be lonely," she said. "The vicar has no lack of society and excitement at present. As for you, I don't think you desire to share either in the society or the excitement. Do you think Hugh would like that you should? Stay with us. I shall tell Hugh that I have taken good care of his treasure, and he will be grateful to me."

As to Veronica's presence in Shipley Magna, Mrs. Sheardown did not trust herself to say very much on that score to Maud. She did

say a few words, quietly, but sternly, disapproving the proceeding. And Maud was unable to gainsay her. But in speaking to her husband, Nelly Sheardown gave utterance to her disgust and indignation quite vehemently.

“Did you ever hear of such a thing, Tom? Did any one ever hear of such a thing? The woman must have lost all sense of decency!”

“Why, Nelly,” returned the captain, “have I not heard you say more than once, that if that misguided girl were to return you would not turn your back on her; but would hold out a helping hand to her in any way that you could? Have I heard you say that, or did I dream it?”

“You know that you have heard me say it. And I do not repent of having said it. But you are not speaking fairly. You know very well, Tom, that my ‘helping hand’ was to be contingent on a very different state of things from that which actually exists. If she had shown any penitence, any remorse for the misery she caused, any consideration for others, I would have done what I could for her; more, I confess, for Maud’s sake and the vicar’s, than her own. But to come back here under the present circumstances; not

letting even a sufficient time elapse to soften the memory of her disgrace; flaunting her ill-gotten riches and her contemptible husband in the face of everybody who has known her from childhood——”

“Contemptible husband! Why, my dear little wife, you know nothing about *him* at all events!”

“Do I not know the circumstances under which the marriage was made?”

“Certainly not.”

“I know, at least, so much of them as suffices to prove that he must be a man without any sense of honour, or dignity, or even decency! That he is, in short, as I said—contemptible!”

The captain had thought it necessary to endeavour to stem his warm-hearted wife's vehemence with a little show of that judicial impartiality which so becomes a man, and which he is usually so ready to display for the edification of the weaker sex in cases that do not touch his own passions or prejudices. But in his heart Captain Sheardown was little less shocked and disgusted at Veronica's conduct than his wife was, and he warmly concurred with her in desiring to keep Maud as far as possible apart from the vicar's daughter.

wretch Gale married her), one a baronet and the other a prince, no less—and the young fellow really and truly well born; the Barlettis come of an illustrious line—that that good-for-nothing hussy, I say, should get two such husbands by nothing in the world but her handsome face, whilst so many of our virtuous young virgins can't manage to get married for the life of them. And dear knows it isn't for want of energy in trying, as far as my observation goes."

"Lady Alicia," said Mrs. Begbie, with dignity, "no well brought-up young girl would put forth the—lures, for so I must call them—which I have seen exercised by that—*creature*! Men are unfortunately weak enough to be attracted by that sort of thing."

"Oh, men are fools enough for anything, I grant you," replied Lady Alicia, giving up the male sex en masse with the greatest liberality.

"They tell me," pursued Mrs. Begbie, who, despite her virtuous indignation, seemed unable to quit the discussion of Veronica's altered fortunes, "that this—*person*—has brought down a carriage and horses—splendid horses!—and a suite of servants with her to the Crown Inn. And her dress is something

incredible in its extravagance. She makes three toilets a day——”

“Four, mamma,” put in Miss Begbie.

“Emmie! I beseech you not to enter into this topic. Indeed, I regret that it has ever been mentioned before you at all.”

“Oh, I don’t think it will do Miss Emmie any harm,” said Lady Alicia, with an inscrutable face.

“No, Lady Alicia. You are right. I feel obliged to you for judging my child so correctly. But still it is a pity that the bloom of youthful freshness should be injured by a too early acquaintance with the wickedness of the world!”

“And they say she *paints* awfully!” observed Miss Begbie, in whose mind the word “bloom” had conjured up by association this crowning iniquity of Veronica.

Mrs. Begbie executed quite a gymnastic shudder.

“It positively makes me ill to think of her!” said she.

“H’m! I don’t remember that ye were so overcome when the girl first ran off, were you? Aye? Well, my memory may be at fault. But I understand very well it *is* aggravating to people—especially to people with daughters—

to see that sort of thing flourishing and prospering."

"Vice, Lady Alicia, *never* prospers in the long run!"

"Oh, of course not. To be sure not. We have high authority for that, Mrs. Begbie. But then ye see it's often such a very long run!"

The above conversation is a pretty fair specimen of the light in which the Princess de' Barletti's appearance at Shipley was looked on by the Daneshire society.

Could Veronica have overheard one morning's chat in any dressing-room or boudoir whose inmates' favour or countenance she desired, she would have at once despaired of making good her footing as a member of the "county" circles. It may seem strange that she had ever for a moment conceived the hope that the gentry of the neighbourhood would receive her. But she had an exaggerated idea of the power of money. And she thought that the bright refulgence of her new rank would dazzle the world from a too close inspection of old blots and spots on her fair fame. And then it had all been vague in her mind. There had perhaps been hardly any definite expectation

of what would occur when she should be at Shipley. But she had had a general idea of awaking envy and admiration and astonishment; of dashing past old acquaintances in a brilliant equipage; of being addressed as "your highness" within hearing of unpolished Daneshire persons devoid of a proper sense of the distinction of classes, and who had habitually spoken of her in her childish days as "the vicar's little lass!" And these things in prospect had appeared to her to suffice. But after a day or two she became aware how strongly she desired to be visited and received by persons whose approval or non-approval made Fate in Daneshire society. She was entirely unnoticed except by one person.

This solitary exception served but to emphasise more strongly the marked neglect of the rest. Lord George Seagrave called on her. Lord George had taken Hammick Lodge for a term of years. He had never been down there at that time of the year before. But his health wouldn't stand a London season; getting old, you know, and that sort of thing. So, as he had to pay for the place, he had come down to the Lodge to pass a month or so until it should be time to go to Schwalbach. And he had heard that Prince Cesare and the

Princess—whom he had the honour of perfectly remembering as Miss Levincourt—were at the Crown. So he had called, and that sort of thing. And he should be uncommonly charmed if the prince would come and dine with him and one or two friends, any day that might suit him. And Cesare accepted the invitation with something like eagerness, and announced that he should drive himself over to Hammick Lodge very soon. This promise he kept, having his horses harnessed to a non-descript vehicle, which the landlord of the Crown called a dog-cart; and sending the London coachman, who sat beside him, to the verge of apoplexy by his unprofessional and incompetent handling of the ribbons. The vicar had pleaded his parish duties as a reason why he could not go very frequently to Shipley Magna. Maud was with the Sheardowns. And besides, Hugh Lockwood, in his interview with Veronica, had so plainly conveyed his determination to keep his future wife apart from her, that Veronica had chosen not to risk a refusal, by asking Maud to come to her. They had met but for a few minutes on the evening when Veronica had driven her father back to the vicarage. Veronica had not alighted. She had looked at her old home

across the drear little graveyard, and had turned and had gone back in her grand carriage. But on that same occasion she had seen Mr. Plew. There needed but a small share of feminine acuteness to read in the surgeon's face the intense and painful emotions which the sight of her awakened within him. She was still paramount over him. She could still play with idle, careless, capricious fingers on his heart-strings. It was a pastime that she did not intend to deny herself.

But what she could not see, and had not nobleness enough even to guess at, was the intense pity, the passion of sorrow over the tarnished brightness of her purity, that swelled her old lover's heart almost to breaking. She had never possessed the qualities needful to inspire the best reverence that a man can give to a woman. And it may be that in the little surgeon's inmost conscience there had ever been some unacknowledged sense of this. But he had looked upon her with such idolatrous admiration ; he had been so unselfishly content to worship from a humble distance ; he had so associated her beauty and brightness with everything that was bright and beautiful in his life, that her degradation had wounded him to the quick. She had

never been to him as other mortals, who must strive and struggle with evil and weakness. He had not even thought of her as of a woman fast clinging to some rock of truth in the great ocean of existence, and supplying her own feebleness by its steady strength. She had been to his fancy a creature to whom it was simply natural and inevitable to be brilliant and stainless as the petal of a lily. And now she was smirched and fallen. After the first paroxysms of impotent rage against the man who had taken her away, almost the bitterest reflection of all was the reflection how base a bait had tempted her.

When her carriage stopped at the gate of St. Gildas's churchyard, and he advanced, hat in hand, and touched—very slightly touched—her proffered hand, and stammered a few incoherent words of greeting, in his shy, awkward, unpolished manner, Veronica thought, "He is overcome at seeing me again, and seeing me in this pomp! Poor little Plew! He really is not a bad fellow; and I shan't forget the good turn he did me about forwarding my letter." Her gratitude did not by any means go to the extent of relinquishing her power to torture his feelings. But the truth, could she have read it in his heart, was, that he was

crushed by the humiliation of being ashamed for her. And yet he loved her still. A more perfect being would doubtless have ceased to love that which his moral sense told him ought to be utterly unloveable. But Mr. Plew was a very far from perfect being; and from the nature of the case and the nature of the man, there was mingled with his love an almost feminine passion of pity which rendered it indestructible.

"You used to have patients in Shipley Magna, Mr. Plew," the "princess" had said graciously. "Whenever your professional duties bring you there, mind you come and see us!"

But two days, three days, passed, and Mr. Plew did not appear at the Crown Inn. Veronica had, in her security that he would come, given orders that he should be admitted at any time. Still, he did not appear. Then came Lord George Seagrave's invitation to Cesare. Veronica told him by all means to go, and told herself that it was a relief to get rid of him for a day. Poor Cesare was very fond of her; almost too fond of her. It became a bore to have his constant presence. But when he was gone, and she was left alone with no companion but her maid, and no re-

source but the inspection of her jewel-box, she began to feel depressed.

"I'm getting into a horrible habit of being low spirited," she thought. "It *is* habit, I suppose. I want keeping up. This leaden weight is intolerable. Bah! I won't stay in this odious hole! I always hated it. I don't know whether one always comes back to one's old loves, but I do believe one returns unflinchingly to one's old hates. I will go away. But where? Dio mio! Anywhere! Back to town. But meanwhile I positively am not well. I ought to see some one. I'll send for little Plew!"

Miss Turtle happened to be spending the afternoon with old Mrs. Plew, when the Princess de' Barletti's pink, perfumed note was brought into the cottage by a servant from the Crown Inn. Mr. Plew was not at home. He was expected back in the course of an hour or so. Very good, the man said. He would put up his horse and gig in the village, and return in the course of an hour to see if the doctor (so Mr. Plew was always styled in Shipley parlance) had come in. He had orders to wait and drive him back to Shipley Magna. Was anything the matter? Any one ill? Not that he knew, special. The lady as they

called Barley-etty seemed a bit out o' sorts. But *he* couldn't say much about it. The moment the groom's back was turned, the two women pounced upon the note. They felt it, they smelt it, they turned it this way and that.

"V. B." said Miss Turtle, deciphering the monogram. "And a crown above. The paper's for all the world like satin. And *how* it is perfumed!"

"Ah! It smells to *me* like them yellow lozenges in the surgery," said Mrs. Plew, pushing the note away from her with a little dissatisfied gesture.

"What a bold handwriting!" exclaimed Miss Turtle. "Quite the aristocrat. Oh dear me! I suppose Mr. Benjamin will be taken up with high society now."

The tip of the poor governess's little nose became red, and her eyes filled with tears. Mrs. Plew grasped her wooden knitting needles more tightly than was her wont, and shook her head with the tremulous movement of age.

"If you could but have seen the carriage she was in," whispered Miss Turtle, plaintively. She was by nature and habit so humble-minded that her jealous comparison of herself

with Veronica had only resulted in her crushing sense of the latter's overwhelming superiority in all points.

"But I did describe it to you, didn't I? And the silver on the horses' harness? Mrs. Meggitt thinks a deal of her spoons, but la! Mrs. Plew, I tell you Mrs. Meggitt's spoons would be but a drop in the ocean if you were to melt them down to ornament that harness. And then the bonnet she had on. And leaning back with such an elegant kind of loll against the cushions. She was painted," said poor Miss Turtle, making a faint little protest on behalf of her own self-respect. *She* at least was never painted. But she added almost immediately with a profound sigh, "But I have been told they all do it in high life."

Still old Mrs. Plew kept her lips closed, and her head shook tremulously. In a few minutes the surgeon came in. Miss Turtle looked at his mother as though expecting her to speak of the note from Shipley Magna. But the old woman said not a word.

"There's a—a—note for you, Mr. Benjamin," said Miss Turtle, timidly; and at the same instant his eye lighted on it as it lay on the table. He took it up quickly, and walked

to the window as though to get a better light as he read it, turning his back on the two women.

"Where is the messenger?" he asked, looking round. "There is mention here of a man and gig waiting to take me back."

"The man said he'd be here again in an hour, Mr. Benjamin. We thought—that is, your mother expected you back by then."

"I must wait for him then, I suppose," said Mr. Plew, pulling out his watch, and beginning to walk softly up and down the room. "It's a—a—patient. The—Princess Barletti, in fact. She is not very well, and wishes to see me. It really is very good of you to give my mother so much of your company, Miss Turtle."

Then Mrs. Plew unclosed her lips and spake.

"Benjy, love, don't you go."

"Mother!"

"Benjy, darling, don't you go."

"Not go to see a patient when I am sent for!"

"Benjy, love, I don't believe she's ill a bit more than you are. Nor so bad either, if feelings could count. And if she *is* bad let her

send for Doctor Gunnery from Danecester, and not for them that she's treated so heartless, and cruel, and shameful."

Mr. Plew had turned ashy pale, and was standing quite still, staring at his mother. The little governess sat with clasped hands and parted lips, glancing nervously from one to the other. She was dumb-founded at Mrs. Plew's unexampled boldness and eloquence. The wooden needles clicked and rattled in the old woman's trembling hands. A bright red spot burned on each withered cheek; and she went on in a strained voice unlike her natural soft tones.

"Shameful, and cruel, and heartless she's treated one that she's not worthy to tie his shoestring! A painted, wanton thing, playing her airs to break an honest man's heart! A man that might have had a good loving wife, and good loving children at his knee but for her. Beauty! Why there's women in the world, common, plain-looking women, with common coarse clothes on their backs, that to my eyes seem as beautiful as the saints and angels beside her! She's bad; bad, and wicked, and wanton! And a painted——"

She stopped suddenly with the opprobrious word on her lips. Her son, without uttering

a syllable, had dropped into a chair and covered his face with his hands. The governess cowered, awe-stricken and trembling like a frightened bird. The knitting fell from the old woman's hands. She sat as still as though she had been turned to stone for a minute or so, looking at her son. Then all at once she got up, went to him, and put her hand on his bowed head.

"Benjy," she said, "my own dear boy, forgive your poor old mother! And may God forgive her for saying a word to hurt the best son that ever mortal woman bore into this world! I don't know what came over me, Benjy. I couldn't help it. 'Twas as if I fain must speak. I'll not say another word, love; not another word. Oh, my boy, don't be angry with your poor mother. I shan't be here to trouble you long! And—Benjy—'twas only because I love you so, my own dear darling." Mr. Plew removed one hand from his face, and put it out to take his mother's. She raised it to her lips and kissed it. "Thank you, my boy," she said, with pathetic humility. And then—with all the angry flush gone from her face, and the tears streaming down it—she feebly tottered out of the room. Miss Turtle rose and followed her to the door.

There she turned and said in a quite placid, almost cheerful, tone, "You needn't be anxious about your mother, Mr. Benjamin. I'll stay with her, and look after her whilst you're gone. Your mother's used to me. And for me it's a real pleasure to do anything for her; it is indeed!"

"God bless you for your kindness. I shall always be grateful to you, and be your friend with all my heart—if you will let me be so," answered the surgeon.

Within a quarter of an hour he was on his road to Shipley Magna.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN AWKWARD IDIOM.

"BUT, I assure you, I suffer unspeakably from nervous depression. You don't know how I sink down like a leaden weight dropped into water sometimes. It is the most dreadful feeling! And besides, I take scarcely anything. A glass or two of champagne at dinner is the only thing that keeps me up!"

"It seems to me that the reaction you complain of feeling ought to be sufficient to convince you that even the small quantity of wine you take is doing you harm instead of good."

"Ah, bah! I don't believe you understand the case."

Veronica threw herself back on her chair with the pettish air of a spoiled child.

Mr. Plew sat opposite to her, very grave, very quiet. He had put aside all her gracious

coqueties, and entered into her reason for sending for him, in a manner so entirely unexpected by her, that for some time she could not credit her senses, but kept awaiting the moment when he should go back to being the Mr. Plew of old days. At last, when she found he persisted in his serious and coldly grave demeanour, she lost her temper, and showed that she had lost it.

But not even this change of mood availed to shake Mr. Plew's steadiness. And gradually a vague fear stole over her. He looked at her so earnestly with something so like compassion in his eyes! Good God! was she *really* very ill? Did his practised observation discern latent malady of which she was herself unconscious? Was the weariness and depression of soul from which she did in truth suffer but the precursor of bodily disease, perhaps even of——? She shuddered with a very unaffected terror, and her smiles, and archings of the brow, and haughty curvings of the lip, and pretty, false grimaces, dropped away from her face like a mask.

"Do you think I am ill?" she asked, with dilated eyes.

"Do not *you* think so, since you sent for me?"

"Yes, yes; but I mean *very* ill—seriously ill, you know! You look so strange!"

"I do not think you are well, madam."

"What—is—it?" she asked, faintly. "You must tell me the truth. But there can't be danger. Don't tell me if you think so! It would only frighten me. And of course I know it's all nonsense. And you *will* tell me the truth, won't you?"

Her self-possession was all gone. She had "lost her head," as the common phrase runs. The unreasoning terror of disease and death, which she inherited from her mother, had taken hold upon her.

The pampered egotism which enabled her so effectually to resist the sorrows and sufferings of others, beyond a mere transitory movement of dilettante sentiment, made her terribly, exquisitely sensitive to her own.

"Don't be alarmed," said Mr. Plew, gently. "There is no need."

"Why do you look so, then? And speak so? I have never been ill since I was a child—not really ill. It would be so dreadful to be ill now!"

The tears were absolutely in her eyes as she spoke. In the presence of a stranger she might have succeeded in commanding herself

more, but with Mr. Plew she did not even attempt to do so.

It pained him greatly to see her tears.

"There is really no cause for your distress," he said. "You are frightening yourself quite needlessly."

"You said I was not well," she answered, in a tone of peevish reproach.

"You have no ailment that a little care and common sense will not cure. You do not live a healthy life. You do not take sufficient exercise. You were accustomed in your girlhood to walk, and to be out in the open air. There is something febrile and over-strained about you."

"I *can't* walk. You see that I am easily tired—that I want support. I have no appetite. I am not so strong as I was."

"You will never be stronger unless you shake off the habits of inertness and languor that have crept over you."

"I am not languid when there is anything to interest or excite me. But what am I to do when I feel bored to death?"

"Boredom" was not a disease with which Mr. Plew's village practice had made him familiar.

"If you were to get up at six o'clock, and

take a walk before breakfast, I am sure you would feel the benefit of it," said he, very simply.

Veronica's panic was passing away. A disorder that could be alleviated by getting up and walking out at six o'clock in the morning was evidently, she conceived, not of an alarming nature.

"My dear Mr. Plew," she said, with a little faint smile, "you are accustomed to prescribe for Shipley constitutions. Now, Shipley people, amongst other charming qualities, are famous for robustness; if I were to say *rude* health, you would think I was malicious. As for me, such violent proceedings as you speak of would simply kill me. Can't you give me something to—keep me up a little? Some—some—what is the proper technicality?—some stimulants—isn't that the word?"

"Fresh air is an excellent stimulant: the best I know."

Veronica looked at his candid simple face searchingly. She looked once, and withdrew her eyes. Then she looked again, and the second time she waved her hand as though dismissing something.

"Let us talk no more of my nonsensical ailments," she said. "I ought to be ashamed

of myself for having brought you here to listen to the recital of them."

"No, Veronica—I beg pardon. No; do not say that. I hope you will send for me at any time, when you think I can be of use. It would be more to me than, perhaps, you can imagine, to know that I was of real use to you, and that you relied on me."

Her face brightened. This was more like the tone she had expected from her old adorer. Poor little Plew! Yes; she really did like him very much. After all, there was something touching in his humble worship. She was not unfeeling enough to be insensible to it. Far from that. His grave air, then, had been merely his "doctor's manner."

She made answer with a soft, liquid, beaming glance of her beautiful eyes: "My dear, good Mr. Plew—we always *were* good friends in the old days, were we not?—I think I gave you proof once upon a time that I relied on you. I have never had an opportunity of saying to you how grateful I was, and am, and always shall be, for your forwarding that letter!"

She held out her jewelled hand to him as she spoke, with a gesture of irresistible grace and spontaneity.

Mr. Plew was not in the least graceful. He took the slender white hand for an instant, looked at it as though it were some frail precious thing, which a too rough touch might break or injure, and then gently let it go again.

He liked to hear her speak so, to hear her allude to the "old days," and acknowledge so candidly her obligation regarding that letter he had sent to Maud (the outer cover, with its few words addressed to himself, was treasured in a little rosewood box, which was the only repository, except the chest in the surgery containing poisons, that Mr. Plew ever locked). It showed a heart still unspoiled, still capable of generous movements.

Poor Mr. Plew!

Veronica saw the impression she had made. Without conscious and deliberate duplicity, but from sheer habit and instinct, she assumed the tone most of all adapted to win the surgeon's admiration. He was not quite so meek and so weak, not quite so easily dazzled by tinsel glories, as she had been wont to think him. She had made a little mistake with her airs of "bonne princesse" and spoiled child.

Now she was all feeling, all candour, all ingenuous confidence. She had suffered much,

very much. She had too much pride to appeal to the sympathies of the envious vulgar. To strangers she presented a front as cold and impassible as their own. So few had enough nobility of nature to be exempt from love of detraction. Her rank! Well, her husband was of her own kindred. Her mother had been a Barletti. Those who grudged her her social elevation did not know that, in accepting it, she was but assuming the rank of her ancestors. But all that was of trifling consequence to her. She had married Cesare because he was devoted to her, and because she was grateful and really—yes, really—attached to him. No one knew the real facts of her story. Those were between herself and one who was gone for ever. If she revealed them the world would understand and forgive much that it had judged harshly. No matter. She was incapable of stooping to make such an appeal to those whom her heart did not value. With a true friend it was different. She had never yet spoken to any one as she was speaking then to Mr. Plew.

He took his leave in a state of bewilderment, out of which only three clear convictions arose, namely, that Veronica Levincourt had been more unhappy than culpable, that her beauty

was the least of her attractive and lovable qualities, and that few of her sex would be capable of her magnanimous candour.

As he stood for an instant, hat in hand, in the doorway, Veronica resolved to put the crowning spell on her enchantments.

"Do you know what I mean to do, Mr. Plew?" said she, with a smile of mingled sweetness and melancholy. "I mean to drive over to-morrow afternoon and see your good mother. She must not think I have forgotten her."

Mr. Plew almost staggered. If a reservoir of ice-cold water had been opened above his head, he could scarcely have been for the moment more disconcerted.

"Oh, no, no, you mustn't!" he exclaimed, with as hasty an impulse of fright and apprehension, as though the Princess de' Barletti had been about to transport herself into his cottage that instant.

"Mustn't!" echoed Veronica, thinking he had misunderstood her. "I must not do what?"

"I don't mean 'must not,' of course. And it is very good and kind of you to think of it. But, I—I—I think—I believe—I should advise—in fact you had better not."

"Why?" demanded Veronica, more puzzled than offended by the unceremonious rejection of her proffered condescension.

"Because—— Well—my mother is a dear, good woman. No son ever had a better mother, and I love her and respect her with all my heart. But—she is old; and old people are not easily persuaded. And she has some notions and prejudices which cannot be overcome; and I should be sorry to treat them roughly. I would it were otherwise: but—I think you had better not come to see us."

Veronica understood it all now.

"Poor dear old soul!" said she, with a compassionate smile. "I did not know she had grown too feeble to see people."

"She did not comprehend—she misunderstood my meaning about mother," thought Mr. Plew, as he walked slowly and meditatively out of the inn-yard. "Perhaps it is all the better. It would only have hurt her to know the truth."

Meanwhile the subject of his reflections was pondering with knit brows, flushed cheek, and tightly-closed lips, on the incredible and infuriating circumstance that "that ignorant, low-born, idiotic old woman" should dare to

refuse to receive the Princess Cesare de' Barletti!

When Cesare returned that evening from Hammick Lodge, and gave his wife an account of Lord George's dinner-party, which he said had been exceedingly pleasant, he appealed to her for enlightenment as to an English phrase which had puzzled him.

"English!" said Veronica, conveying into her voice and manner a skilful mingling of insolence and indifference—for Mr. Plew's revelation had galled her unspeakably, and she was by no means in an amiable mood. "You don't mean to say that you tried to speak English? Dio buono!"

"Yes, I tried!" answered Cesare simply. "But Lorgiorgio speaks French pretty well, and so did some of the others. So I was not embarrassed to make myself understood. And do you know, signora mia, that I make progress in my English! Per Bacco, I shall soon be an accomplished Cockanì!"

"An accomplished *what*?—Cockney? How ineffably absurd you are, Cesare!"

"Tante grazie! You don't spoil one with compliments, Signora Principessa adorata! But listen: what do they mean when they say that one wears a tight corset?"

"How can I *guess* what you have in your head? Who says so? I suppose that if any one says so, he means simply what the words convey."

"Niente! Not at all! There is another meaning. You shall judge. There was a young man at dinner named Snō. I remembered that name—Signor Neve. What a comical patronymic! Well, Signor Snō asked me if we had seen much of your friend Miss Desmond since we had been in this place. He spoke in French. And I told him no; we had not had that pleasure, for she was visiting in the house of some friends. Then a man—a great hunter of the fox, Lorgiorgio told me—laughed, and said to Snō in English, 'No, no. They took Miss Desmond out of the way. They did not want her to have anything to say to the princess. They are too'—— I cannot remember the word, but I know it meant——"

"Strait-laced?" suggested Veronica, with flashing eyes, and quickly-heaving bosom.

"Ecco! Precisely! And now what did he mean by saying that the friends in question were too tight-laced?"

"He meant—— He meant to be insolent, and odious and insulting! How could Lord

George permit such audacious impertinence in your presence?"

"Eh?" exclaimed Cesare, greatly amazed. "I had no idea! I thought it was a jest! Lorgiorgio called out to the man to take some wine and stop his mouth. The others did not laugh, it is true," he added reflectively. "And they looked at me oddly."

"I will not stay another day in this hateful, barbarous, boorish den!" cried Veronica. And then she burst into a passion of angry tears.

"Diavolo!" muttered Cesare, staring at her in much consternation. "Explain to me, cara mia, what it means exactly, this accursed tight-lacing!"

"I have told you enough," returned Veronica through her tears. "Don't for Heaven's sake begin to tease me! I *cannot* bear it."

"Listen, Veronica," said Cesare, stroking down his moustache with a quick, lithe movement of the hand that was strangely suggestive of cruelty, "you *must* answer me. Ladies do not understand these things. But if your redfaced chaser of the fox permitted himself an impertinence in my presence at the expense of my wife—he must receive a lesson in good manners."

"Cesare! I hope you have no absurd notion in your head of making a scandal."

"No; I shall merely correct one."

"Cesare! Cesare! you surely are not indulging in any wild idea of—— Oh, the thing is too ridiculous to be thought of. Entirely contrary to our modern manners and customs——"

"Giuro a Dio!" exclaimed her husband, seizing her wrist, "don't preach to me, but answer, do you hear?"

The sudden explosion of animal fury in his face and voice frightened her so thoroughly, that she was for the moment incapable of obeying him.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Cesare! Don't look so! You—you startle me. What is it you want? Oh my poor head, how it throbs! Wait an instant. Well—the foolish words mean—means—I hardly know what I'm saying—it means strict, prudish, collet-monté. What that man was saying—I dare say he was not quite sober—was that the Sheardowns were too prudish and particular to like Maud to associate with *me*. There, I have told you. And I'll never forgive you, Cesare, for behaving in this way to me, never!"

Cesare dropped her wrist. "Che, che!" he

said. "Is that all? Diamine, it seems to me that the impertinence was to those others, not to you. Do *we* want the visits of prudes and "colli torti"! If Miss Maud's friends have that reputation, so much the worse! And you cry for *that*? Women, women, who can understand you?"

Veronica gathered her draperies together and swept out of the room with her face buried in her handkerchief. She told her maid that she had a violent headache. And her maid told Dickinson that she was sure "monsieur and madame" had been having a dreadful quarrel: which announcement Mr. Dickinson received with the following profoundly philosophical remark: "Oh! Well, you know, they'd have had to begin *some* time or other."

And the prince lit a cigar, and leaned out of window to smoke it, partly penitent and partly cross. And as he smoked, he could not help thinking how very much pleasanter and jollier it had been at Hammick Lodge, than it was in the best sitting-room of the Crown; and how utterly impossible it was to calculate on the capricious and unreasonable temper of his wife.

CHAPTER IX.

A RESOURCE.

THE evening of Lord George Segrave's dinner-party was the first occasion on which Cesare de' Barletti had given his wife a glimpse of the brute fury that lay latent under his gentle lazy demeanour. They had had quarrels before : lovers' quarrels ; in which Cesare had protested against Veronica's cruelty, and Veronica had played off her despotic airs, and they had both been vehement, and demonstrative, and childish. And the end of such quarrels had invariably been to bring back Cesare humbly imploring pardon at the feet of the triumphant beauty.

But never had his looks and tones been such as met her astonished eyes and ears on that miserable evening.

And there was no deep repentance afterwards, no humble suing for pardon on his part. He approached her the next morning

with a smile and a kiss ! and when she drew back in dumb resentment, he merely shrugged his shoulders, lit his cigar, and sauntered off into the stable-yard.

In truth Cesare considered himself to be the injured person. His wife, by her inconceivably absurd temper, had led him into an error, which error had thrown him into a rage, which rage had caused him to far cattivo sangue : literally, to make bad blood ! That was no trifle. Cesare was always particularly careful not to fly into a passion if he could avoid it. And his temper was so indolently mild in general that he had no great difficulty in avoiding frequent ebullitions of anger.

To an unaccustomed English eye, indeed, he might have seemed to be in paroxysms of fury on many occasions when his feelings were scarcely stirred. He had the national characteristic of instantly translating slight and superficial emotions into very violent outward expression by means of voice, face, and gesture, and of thus working off excitement at a cheap cost, if the phrase may pass.

But whenever angry motion went beyond the slight and superficial stage with him, it was apt to become very terribly intense indeed ; and to assume the form of personal hatred,

and a deadly desire of vengeance against the object of it.

To talk to Cesare Barletti about hating a sin, but pardoning a sinner, or to use any phrase involving a similar idea, would have appeared to him very much like uttering meaningless jargon.

He never conceived or thought of *anything* in an abstract form. The unseen—the intangible—had no power over his imagination. Hate a sin, indeed! Why should he hate a sin? Che, che! But he could hate a sinner, or a saint either, if need were—with a relentless animosity of which it would be difficult to exaggerate the bitterness.

On the occasion in question, however, his anger had been merely evanescent. It was all an absurdity and a mistake. What if a man did express his opinion that such and such people were too rigid in their notions to desire to associate with Veronica? Well, so much the worse for such and such people, as he had said to his wife.

He had all his life heard about English prudery. There were even persons who objected to play cards, and to go to the opera. Was he to distress himself about that?

Veronica was Princess Cesare de' Barletti.

That was sufficient with persons who knew the world.

• He would permit no man to insult the Princess Cesare de' Barletti with impunity. But a harmless jest directed against the roturier prejudices of persons who did *not* know the world was another thing.

Cesare's quickness of perception was rapidly bringing him to the conviction that it was a far finer thing to be a "prince" in England than in Naples. Veronica, in bestowing her wealth and herself upon him, had not then made an entirely one-sided bargain. The consideration was not an unpleasant one.

He drove over to Hammick Lodge more than once after his first visit to Lord George, and met several flying guests there, mostly bachelors, and, with few exceptions, active patrons of that noble institution—the Turf. Cesare found these gentlemen vastly pleasant and unaffected: entirely devoid of the insular stiffness which he had kept continually looking for since his arrival in Great Britain, and had found up to the height of his expectation in only one individual—the accomplished Mr. Dickinson.

The "turfy" gentlemen, on their part, found

Barletti a charming fellow, and were devilish glad to make his acquaintance, 'pon their soul—not perhaps a very mighty oath—they were! But the “turfy” gentlemen were greatly hurt and disappointed in discovering one singular blemish in Barletti’s moral nature, he steadily refused to “make a book” on any coming event whatever, on the extraordinarily naive plea that he did not understand betting.

“My dear fellow,” said one tall, thin gentleman, with a long, sharp chin and dull fishy eyes, “it’s as simple as A, B, C.”

“Ah, già!” returned the prince, with much suavity. “But A-a, B-a, C-a is not simple until you have learned it.”

Nevertheless, despite this deplorable lack of enterprise on Cesare’s part, he was very popular at Hammick Lodge. He played an uncommonly good game at *écarté*, a very fair one at whist, and that he was no match for his host at billiards, did not certainly operate against him in Lord George’s good graces.

He had no formal reconciliation with his wife; but the coolness between them—which in fact had only existed on her side—passed away in a day or two.

Cesare never knew how much it cost Vero-

nica to condone his violent behaviour, without an expression of the deepest penitence on his part. And his ignorance of the sacrifice her haughty spirit was forced to make, rendered that sacrifice, perhaps, a little less difficult than it would otherwise have been. At least there was in his mind no perception of what she deemed a bitter humiliation.

In her loneliness, and she was very lonely—but, as Cesare said, it was she who had desired to come to Shipley; and could he help it if the people would not call on her?—she had recourse to the only human being on whose entire devotion she could rely. She took to writing letters to Mr. Plew.

The letters, at first, were short ones; mere little notes written with the excuse of asking his advice upon this or that trifling point of regimen. She would follow his advice. She had been thinking over it, and she really believed that exercise would be good for her. Could he not come to see her? Why had he not been?

The first note of the kind brought, not Mr. Plew, but a brief professional recapitulation of the points he had urged upon her consideration.

In the second note, she asked again why he had not been to see her. Was it true, as had been whispered to her, that the attractions of a certain meek *dove* had succeeded in engrossing him altogether?

No sooner had she despatched this note than she wished to recal it. She was ashamed of it. It was too familiar—too condescending.

The answer to it, however, contained no allusion to her hint; neither denial nor confirmation. It merely stated that Mr. Plew would willingly go over to Shipley Magna *if he could be of real service to her*; but that, unless she had need of his presence, he must refrain from doing so. His mother was ill, and required all the care and attention he could spare time to give her.

This reply of the surgeon reached Veronica on a rainy afternoon. She was dull and dispirited. Her husband was at Hammick. The suppressed quiet sorrow in the tone of Mr. Plew's letter chimed in with Veronica's mood at the moment of receiving it.

A few slow tears trickled down her cheeks, as she sat with her head leaning on her hand, looking down on the note.

She *must* have some sympathy! She must dissipate somewhat of the weight of sadness

that oppressed her soul, by confiding to another human heart a few, at least, of her sorrows.

She sat down to write to Mr. Plew.

As she wrote on, the half-revelations she had intended, became whole revelations. She found a relief in the depiction of her feelings—even in that of her faults. She would rather speak evil of herself, than not speak of herself at all. She poured forth her complaints, her chagrins, and her disappointments without reserve.

Here was one who would listen patiently ; who would sympathise sincerely ; who would feel her sorrows as his own. Here was a heart that might be trusted to beat faithfully, let it ache as it would. His judgment might condemn her, but his feelings would take her part. He might preach, warn, reprove her even, but the reproof would have no sting. She could accept such reproof, she could embrace it, for she would know that it came out of the depth of a great love. He would ask nothing, he would expect nothing, he would resent nothing. He could thrust himself aside with a sublime magnanimity, and think only of her.

“Oh, she *must* drink this cup of refresh-

man for which she was thirsting. He would suffer—— Yes: but he was strong. She was weak and lonely, and miserable, and she could not spare.”

So she sent the letter.

“What do you write so often to that man in cars Veronica?” asked Cesare, unexpectedly, on the day following that on which her first letter was despatched.

“So—so often?” she stammered.

Five minutes previous she would have had not the least objection to his knowing that she wrote to Mr. Plew every day had such been the case. But the question took her by surprise, and she was startled by it.

“Yes: it is often I think. Two letters in one week. This lying on the table”—and Cesare took up a pink envelope sealed and marked—“is the second that I *know of*.”

“It is kind of you not to recollect that I told you I had consulted Mr. Plew about my nervous headaches! I write to him partly about them: and besides he is one of my oldest and most intimate friends. I have known him since a child.”

“Ah, Veronica!” replied Cesare, carelessly. And the next minute he seemed to have forgotten the whole affair.

But when in the course of two more days a reply arrived from Mr. Plew, Cesare playing with the Spitz dog in one corner of the sofa, watched his wife when the letter was delivered to her—watched her while she opened it and began to read it, and finally asked, “Is the letter from our good papa, il reverendissimo Signor Vicario?”

“No ; it is from Mr. Plew.”

The instant directness of the answer seemed a little unexpected by him. He looked up at her for an instant, and then began to stroke the dog in a gentler and more caressing way than he had used before.

“Where are you going, dearest?” he asked, presently.

“To my own room.”

“To read your letter in peace? May I see it?”

“See it? See this letter?”

“Yes; is it indiscreet?” he asked, showing his white teeth in a smile that flashed for a second and was gone.

For a scarcely perceptible space of time Veronica hesitated. Then she tossed him the letter disdainfully.

“You are as curious as a baby!” she said.

He took the letter and pored over it gravely.

Then he brought it back to her and kissed her hand.

"I can't read it," he said. "What a devil of a writing!"

Veronica had fully reckoned on this inability of Cesare's. Between his imperfect knowledge of English and the cramped characters of Mr. Plew's handwriting that looked as though it were expressly invented and adopted for the purpose of scrawling the hieroglyphics familiar to our eyes in doctors' prescriptions, she had been tolerably sure that Cesare would fail to glean much information from the letter let it contain what it might.

"Why should Cesare have wanted to see that letter?" she asked herself when she was alone in her own room. "It must be from the mere suspicious dislike that anything, however trifling, should pass between me and any one else with which he is not fully acquainted. I have noticed this trait in him lately—only lately. He used not to be so in Italy."

Veronica forgot that in Italy Cesare had been himself not only her sole confidant, but her sole *possible* confidant.

When she had perused Mr. Plew's letter, she felt glad that Cesare had been unable to decipher it.

There was no word in it which should have made him justly discontented with Mr. Plew ; but there were many words which would have roused his anger and indignation against his wife.

“The account of your unhappiness cuts me to the heart,” he wrote in one place. “I am not at all skilful with my pen, nor able to express what I feel. But I am so sure you are wrong in giving way to these morbid feelings ; and yet I pity you so much for having them. I had hoped that you were at last happy and contented. God knows that there is nothing I would not give to see you so.”

And again : “I am solemnly certain that your first duty now is to try to gain your husband’s whole confidence and affection. Remember you chose him freely, and he loved you when there was no one else, whom you knew of, to love you !”

And once more : “I wish I was clever, and could write like you. But I cannot. I can only beg and beseech you to cast off gloomy and repining thoughts. There is one thing we can all do—try to be useful to others. Think of their sorrows more than your own. Even in my humble way I find that this soothes my pain of mind as nothing else

soothes it. And you who are so rich and so young and so clever might do a deal of good. You don't know the suffering there is in the world that a few copper coins would lighten. I feel your confidence in writing to me very much. But I wish for your sake that you would have no secrets from your husband. You ask me to come and see you. I cannot just at present. My mother is *very* ill; and there is an epidemic fever in the parish. My life is not altogether a bed of roses."

Within a week after the receipt of that letter, Mrs. Plew was dead. And the Prince and Princess de' Barletti had gone away to London in great haste; for a malignant form of typhus fever was raging in Shipley Magna.

CHAPTER X.

A FRIENDLY TEA-DRINKING.

It was near the end of a very sultry summer day in London—a day in the quite late summer.

The people who were able to leave town next week pronounced that the season was over. The people whose business, or interest, or impecuniosity obliged them to linger a while longer, declared that there was so much going on still, they positively didn't know how to keep all their engagements.

It was, however, near enough to the period styled by London tradesmen “the fag end of the season” to bring it to pass that Miss Betsy Boyce had no dinner invitation for that day, and no invitation to any later assembly, and that she was consequently drinking tea at about half-past seven o'clock in Mr. Lovegrove's house in Bedford-square.

Betsy Boyce was quite free from any vulgar

prejudices on the score of fashionable or unfashionable hours. She would drink tea at seven o'clock or dine at eight, or breakfast at any hour from nine A.M. to two P.M. with perfectly accommodating good humour.

"It matters very little what you call a meal," she would say. "If you eat between eight and nine o'clock at night, and like to call that dinner, I'm quite content. If you have your real solid dinner at two or three, and your old-fashioned tea at five or six, and like to call that lunch, or kettle-drum, or anything else, I'm equally quite content. When one lives in the world one must do as the world does in those matters. I have heard papa say that when he was at Vienna, and knew the old Prince Metternich, he has seen him at a grand banquet dozens of times, playing with a plateful of brown bread-and-butter, and tasting nothing else. Well, he ate his wholesome food at a wholesome hour, of course. But he never thought of changing people's manners and customs. No more do I."

Something of this kind she had said in answer to Mrs. Lovegrove's ostentatiously humble apology for inviting her to tea at seven o'clock.

"It is not," said Mrs. Lovegrove, with a kind of virtuous self-denying severity that would have exasperated any one less genuinely tolerant and good-natured than Betsy Boyce, "it is not that I do not thoroughly understand the usages of the circles in which you habitually move. It would be strange, bred up as I was at our place in the country among the élite of our country society—you won't mind my saying that country society is, as a general rule, more exclusive, and more rigid, on the score of *birth*, than the mixed and ever-varying circles of the metropolis?—it would be strange if I did *not* understand those usages."

"To be sure," said Miss Boyce, pleasantly. "What uncommonly good cake this is. Thanks; I *will* have a piece more of it."

"But when I married Mr. Lovegrove I put all that aside at once, and for ever. I looked my position in the face, and accepted all its conditions."

"And a very comfortable position it is, too, Mrs. Lovegrove. And excessively delighted a good many ladies of my acquaintance would be to jump into such another."

It will be perceived that the acquaintance between Mrs. Lovegrove and Miss Boyce, begun in Mrs. Frost's drawing-room, had

advanced towards something like intimacy. Betsy Boyce was, as she herself declared, eminently a social being. She was just as cheerful and content in the solicitor's house in Bedford-square as at my lord duke's in Carlton-gardens.

And whilst she regaled the lawyer's wife with stories of the Olympian feasts she shared with the gods and goddesses, whose mythology (carefully edited with a view to its meeting the public eye) is contained in Sir Bernard Burke's red volumes, she never offended her hosts by appearing to despise their earthlier hospitality.

Mr. Lovegrove considered Miss Boyce to possess extraordinary spirits and an immense fund of anecdote. Mrs. Lovegrove said she had a pensive pleasure in her conversation, as it reminded her of the old times passed at her papa's place in the country. Augusta asked her serious opinion as to the spread of high church doctrine among the aristocracy, and was it true that a certain illustrious person was going over to Rome. Altogether she was a general favourite with the whole family.

One frequent topic of her private conversations with Mrs. Lovegrove was the lamentable state of affairs in the household at Bays-

water, as she designated Mr. Frost's residence.

Things were going on there from bad to worse: that is, between husband and wife, she meant. Georgina was an old friend of hers, but she must say Georgina was to blame. She was so indifferent to Mr. Frost's comfort; so neglectful of his home; so careless to please him; and so indifferent about displeasing him. She on her side complained of her husband's meanness and parsimony. He grudged her this, and declined to give her that. Which, said Miss Boyce, was certainly odd in a man who had always been so lavishly indulgent a husband.

"Perhaps he has at last been able to see what a fool that woman has been making of herself by her extravagance, and is beginning to turn over a new leaf. Let us hope so! Let us, at least *try* to hope so!" said Mrs. Lovegrove, with all the fervour of charity.

"At any rate, Georgina ought to behave better. What *does* it matter whether she has guipure at five guineas a yard, or cotton tatting round her petticoats? If I had such a delightful husband as Mr. Frost—who when he is not worried to death by business can be perfectly *entrancing*, and you may say I said

so—I'm sure I would wear sackcloth to please him."

Mrs. Lovegrove did not quite concur in this estimate of Mr. Frost. He was no great favourite of hers, and her womanly and wifely shrewdness had long ago discovered that he looked down somewhat on her husband, and considered him his inferior. But she was very clearly and unhesitatingly of opinion that cotton tatting ought forthwith to be substituted for guipure on Mrs. Frost's petticoats.

"Georgina tells me," said Miss Boyce, "that there is at times something so strange about her husband, that he seems scarcely in his right mind. Something is preying on him, I fancy. It isn't business troubles I suppose, eh?" It was fortunate for her acquaintances that Betsy Boyce was good-natured; for she was rarely discreet, and not a little curious.

"What business troubles Mr. Frost may have on his private account, I am unable to say," replied Mrs. Lovegrove. "But as to Frost and Lovegrove, there is no cause for anxiety about them; of that you may be quite assured!"

"Ah, then I dare say it is mostly, if not entirely, Georgina's fault. He is desperately

fond of her; and she is as hard and cold to him as a block of Wenham ice."

"I consider Mr. Frost's infatuated weakness for his wife to be positively culpable! But what, alas! can one expect from a man totally devoid of religious principles?"

In order to avert the stream of Mrs. Lovegrove's indignation from Sidney Frost—for whom the kindly old maid had a real liking—Miss Boyce changed the subject of discourse.

"Ah, dear me!" she exclaimed, fanning herself, "it is a queer world! Talk of books! I know much stranger stories than ever I saw in a book yet. There's that Princess de' Barletti, for instance. What a career hers has been!"

"Oh, do tell me, Miss Boyce, *is* she received in the highest society? I trust not, for the credit of our aristocracy."

"H'm! Well I don't know that one more or less would much affect the credit of our aristocracy!"

"Eh?"

"However that's neither here nor there. I believe the fact is she is *not* much received. She might have been taken up at one time by a certain set. But she is devoured by ambition. She wanted to be as great a lady as

the greatest, and to play princess; and that wouldn't do."

"Ambition indeed! pretty ambition!"

"Yes; pretty ambition. But yet—it seems a strange thing to say, but I am not sure there is not a grain of perverted good in it."

"Good? How do you mean?"

"Well, I—I think a woman who would have been downright, frankly, bad and unscrupulous, might have had a better chance."

"My *dear* Miss Boyce!"

"Yes; I know it sounds very horrible. But what I mean is this; this young woman can't be contented with the society of fast flashy folks of doubtful reputation. She might have got that, having money and beauty, and a certain notoriety *de scandale*. But, you may call it pride, or ambition, or vain-glory, or whatever you like, the fact remains that she knows there is something higher and better than that sort of thing, and that she aspires to it. She can't be at peace without the good opinion of persons she can respect, and—she will never get it."

"I should think not!"

"She will never get it, because she has not strength to make any real sacrifice of her

vanity and selfishness. And yet, I believe she is eating her heart out with misery and mortification in the midst of all that she paid such a terrible price to gain!"

Mrs. Lovegrove stared at the speaker in surprise. She had never seen such a grave expression on Betsy Boyce's round rubicund visage. The brisk, lively, old lady had gradually slidden into a serious tone as she spoke, and when she ceased, there was something like a tear in her eye.

Sarah Lovegrove's heart—although it did not beat with remarkable warmth—was better than her creed. But she repressed a womanly movement of pity by way of asserting the stern purity of her principles, and replied with elongated upper lip and incisive brevity: "That is the natural result to which such iniquity leads, Miss Boyce."

"Dear me," said Miss Boyce, "I've been making quite a preachment! But it is not altogether my own wisdom that I have been uttering. The fact is that I was yesterday with that sweet creature, Maud Desmond, and she talked to me a little about the vicar's daughter; and when she was out of the room, Mrs. Sheardown talked of her a great

deal, and, between the two, I got a pretty clear notion of the state of the case."

"You don't mean to say that Miss Desmond visits her?"

"No, no; their lives are apart altogether. But I do believe that if Veronica needed anything—if she were sick, for instance—Maud would go to her directly."

"Would Mr. Lockwood allow that?" asked Mrs. Lovegrove, with something like a sneer.

"Yes, I think he would. He's not the good fellow I take him for, if he would oppose it!"

Mrs. Lovegrove had not quite forgiven Maud for preferring Hugh to her son. As Maud had not turned out to be an heiress, the thing was the less to be regretted. But to do Mrs. Lovegrove justice, she had been almost as willing to encourage Augustus's penchant before there was any idea of Maud's being wealthy as after. And her maternal vanity had been ruffled by the young lady's cold discouragement of her darling Gus.

Mrs. Lovegrove's character was not malicious at bottom, however, and, after a minute or so, she said, "I do think Miss Desmond is a really good girl."

"Good? She's an angel! And so clever!"

"Indeed? I did not perceive much—a—

much solidity of intellect in Miss Desmond, I confess; but she is very young still. However, it was a very proper attention on her part to call on us directly she came to town. Mr. Lovegrove knew her mother well. He is, indeed, in some sort the young lady's guardian, and he was gratified by her coming."

"Maud Desmond always does the right thing," said Miss Boyce, in serene unconsciousness of Augustus's ill-starred wooing. "It was a good thing that the Sheardowns brought her to town with them on a visit. Very nice people the Sheardowns. I knew them at Shipley. I hear pretty often from that neighbourhood, and I fancy the vicarage was no fitting or pleasant place for the poor girl."

"Really!" exclaimed Mrs. Lovegrove, with a strong gleam of curiosity in her grey eyes.

"No, I'm afraid not. Emma Begbie writes to me—there, I've let her name slip out. But you don't know her, and, probably, never will, so it don't much matter. Well, this young lady tells me that the vicar is going to the dogs—that isn't her phrase, but it is her meaning—as fast as he can. He has cut his old friends, and formed low connexions. And he doesn't even attend to the duties of his

church, but has got a wretched curate, at twopence a year, to do his duty for him, and, in fact, the whole thing is as bad as it can be. He's no fit guardian, and his house is no fit home for a young girl."

"A—clergyman—of—the—Church—of—England!" said Mrs. Lovegrove, with portentous slowness, nodding her head at each word.

"Oh, dear, yes! There's no doubt in the world about *that*."

Then the tea-things were cleared away, and presently the Misses Phœbe and Lucy and Dora Lovegrove made some music. And Augustus—who had given up his comic songs, and ceased to rival Mr. John Parry—sang a Latin hymn, accompanying himself; and if the vocal portion of this performance were almost inaudible at the other end of the drawing-room, the pianoforte part was attacked with unsparing vigour. And then Miss Boyce's cab was sent for, and she went home, having passed as she protested a very pleasant evening.

CHAPTER XI.

TEMPEST.

THEIR life in town, however it may have proved to be dust and ashes in Veronica's mouth, was mightily to the taste of her husband. One great drawback to his pleasure in it at first, was Veronica's perverse determination to be discontented, as he deemed it. What could she desire that she had not? They were rich, young, fond of one another—he at least still loved her, although she seemed resolved to try to cure him of his fondness!—and surrounded by companions who asked nothing better than to be merry and enjoy themselves! What though this frumpish dowager had markedly declined to be introduced to her; or that dowdy countess refused her invitations; or that it had hitherto been impossible to find a lady who would undertake to present her at court? Were not the ladies

whom she did know incomparably more lively and amusing than these dull persons? And was it not an incredible perversity in Veronica to long for that which, had it been offered to her—or so Cesare thought—she would have loathed? The husband and wife had many a sharp discussion on this score.

When Veronica now told Cesare that he did not understand this or that, he would argue the point with vivacity. Indeed but he did understand: quite as well as she did; perhaps better! She was but a woman. And if he *were* a foreigner in England, he yet knew the world, it might be that he even knew the English world, a great deal more thoroughly than she thought for! His friends mauvais genre? *Bah! Mrs. Douglas De Raffville was one of the most fashionable women in London. Lord George, who had introduced her to them, said so! She was at any rate very handsome, very brilliant, and very good-natured: that they could see for themselves. Per Bacco! These simagrées on her part were too amusing! Did she know the history of the withered little duchess with the pearls, to whom she had been so civil at Naples? Then for a day, perhaps, Veronica would break out into wild gaiety. She would be all ablaze with excitement, until

even the rather noisy mirth of the society that surrounded her would grow dumb, and its members would stare at her uneasily, or indulge in expressive shrugs and grimaces to each other. These fits of feverish spirits were invariably followed by prolonged depression and gloom: sometimes even by attacks of illness that obliged her to keep her bed for a day or so. But she would see no physician. Her husband, more and more separated from her companionship, and absorbed in his own pursuits and with his own comrades, gradually ceased to disquiet himself about these strange fluctuations of health and spirits. There was no one at hand who cared for her. Her father wrote rarely and briefly. Maud was separated from her as though the thickness of the globe were between them.

So day by day and hour by hour her rich beauty withered, her health decayed, her youth was wasted by a consuming fire. One afternoon Veronica was lying half asleep on a couch in her boudoir. They had taken a furnished house for the season in a fashionable street, and were installed there with their servants. Her Swiss maid Louise entered the darkened room quietly, and stood listening.

“Is Madame la Princesse asleep?”

"Eh? What is it? My head aches," answered Veronica, in a drowsy voice.

"I should not have ventured to disturb Madame la Princesse, but the gentleman was so importunate that the footman begged me to come and speak with madame."

"A gentleman? I can't see the card by this light. Tell me the name."

"Mistare—Mistare Frost."

"Mr. Frost! Well—yes; let Mr. Frost come up-stairs. Give me the eau-de-cologne. Draw that curtain a little more. No light, no light! Ah, Dio buono, how my head throbs!"

In another minute Mr. Frost was ushered into the boudoir, and the door was closed behind him.

"Have I the honour of speaking to the Princess de' Barletti?" asked Mr. Frost, to whom the gloom of the chamber seemed at first almost pitch darkness.

Veronica greeted him, and told him where to find a seat. She half rose from her sofa, but fell back again with a murmur of pain.

"You are suffering? I grieve to intrude. But my business is of such importance——"

"Of such importance?"

"To me of the very deepest."

Veronica poured some eau-de-cologne on to her hands, and passed them over her forehead, pushing the elaborate waves of hair back ruthlessly. Then she looked more steadily than she had done at Mr. Frost, and her eyes, more accustomed to the dimness than his, could perceive that he was changed ; bent, and thin, and haggard. And that his restless hands wandered constantly to his mouth, and that he bit his nails furiously. He, for his part, could but just discern the outline of her face and figure.

"Madam," said Mr. Frost, "I will not waste your time or my own—or my own—minutes are very precious—by useless preamble. In preferring the request I am about to make, I know that I am doing an unusual—some might say an unwarrantable thing. But I am hard pressed: temporarily—only temporarily. And I was to-day inspired suddenly with the idea—with the hope that you might help me."

"In what way can it be in my power to help you?" said Veronica, in a strange dreamy voice.

"Will you lend me some money?"

He made the request with startling abruptness, and leaned forward in his chair eagerly.

"Lend *you* some money? I—thought you were very rich!"

"I shall be. I am, virtually. But there is a temporary pressure; a severe pressure." Mr. Frost put his hand to his head, as though the pressure he spoke of were there. "I will be frank with you. Women can be compassionate and generous sometimes. If you will lend me the sum I want, you will save me from ruin!"

"From ruin!" Veronica made an effort, and seemed to rouse herself from a lethargy that had apparently benumbed her faculties. Her voice was more like her usual one as she said, "But *can* I do this?"

"I think you can. The sum I need is a large one. But I know your means are large. I want two thousand pounds."

"It is indeed a large sum!"

"If I can have that sum by the end of this month, the rest may go. I shall care for nothing. That is—I mean I shall be safe."

"I should like to do good to somebody," murmured Veronica, half aloud.

"You will do good to more than one person if you—— Stay! You know young Lockwood—Hugh Lockwood—who is engaged to marry Maud Desmond?"

"Yes : is it for *him* ?"

"You love Maud Desmond, do you not? I have heard that you loved her so much as to offer her a part of your fortune!"

"I do love her. But what——"

"I cannot explain particulars. But I will swear to you by any most solemn oath you choose, that in lending me this money you will be serving them. If I cannot induce you to believe that—believe at least that as I said, you will be saving me from ruin. God is my witness that, that, is true!"

The manner of the man—so different from the self-possessed, easy, dignified air she remembered in him—impressed her greatly.

"I should like," she said again, "to do good to somebody."

Mr. Frost gathered all his energies to plead his cause. His words were eloquent. But more eloquent to Veronica were his trembling lips, his wrinkled brow, his eager and restless hands.

"If I can do this thing I will," she said at length.

He sprang up and took her hand. "I cannot thank you in words," he said. "It was a good inspiration that made me think of applying to you!"

"But—I shall need my husband's consent."

"Your husband's—your husband's only?"

"Certainly. Whose else?"

"You have no marriage settlement? No trustees?"

Strange as it may appear, this was the first time that the idea of having her money settled on herself, had occurred to her! Her marriage had been hurried and private. There was no one to watch her interests or advise her.

And, lest it should be supposed that Cesare had purposely taken a dishonourable advantage of her confidence or imprudence, whichever it might be styled, it must be explained that marriage settlements are unknown in his country! and that he was too ignorant of English customs to be aware of their existence here.

"No," she answered, after a moment's pause. "I have no settlement; no trustees. I have no one but Cesare."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Frost, looking at her for an instant with a glance of his old searching keenness. "Fortunately for me," he added, "your influence over Prince Barletti is unbounded. I remember noting that."

“Do you?”

“Yes. If I have your promise—and what a load of care you take from me in making it I cannot attempt to express to you—I am secure about the prince. But he may require more explanations than you have asked for. You have been generous in refraining from questioning me. I feel it. I shall not forget it. But we men are more—reasonable! He will say perhaps, ‘Why did not this man apply elsewhere?—to his partner, for example?—to those connected with him by business ties?’ I reply that in certain circumstances to be seen to need a thing is fatal. The very urgency of the case excites mistrust and apprehension. And the small sum which divides ruin from security, cannot be obtained, *because* it is so essential to obtain it. But I will see the prince. I will speak with him. I will give him any guarantee in my power. Only let me have your promise. That is sufficient. One word more! I rely on your generosity and honour to keep this application a secret.”

“If I can do this thing, I will,” said Veronica once more.

Then Mr. Frost took his leave, scarcely daring to believe in his success; and yet feel-

ing as though a mantle of lead, such as Dante gives to certain wretched souls in purgatory, had been lifted from his head and shoulders since entering that house.

Cesare returned late in the afternoon from his ride. Cesare's riding, though somewhat better than his driving, was yet not altogether satisfactory to insular eyes. There was a wooden rigidity about his legs, and a general air of being keenly alive to the *possibility*—(to say no more)—of his horse having the best of it in case of any difference of opinion arising between them, inimical to grace. Nevertheless as he had very fairly good horses, and was willing to lend one of them now and then to a friend, he found companions content to join him in equestrian excursions to places in the neighbourhood of London : or even—though of this his friends were more shy—in a canter in the Row. On the present occasion he had been honoured by the society of two ladies, in addition to that of his friend Count Polyopolis—a Greek gentleman of very varied accomplishments, which were apparently not duly appreciated in his own country ; but for the exercise of which he had found a favourable field in London, after having exhausted Paris and Vienna. They

had all been very merry, and Cesare entered in high good humour.

"You were wrong not to come, *ma belle princesse*," said he, gaily. "It was very pleasant. We alighted at a village inn, and had beer! *Figurati!* And there was a garden to the inn, where there was a target. We shot at the target with bows and arrows that the people had. Nobody could hit the mark. It was immensely amusing!"

Veronica's headache had apparently passed off. She was dressed with care and elegance. Her voice was gentle, and her manner conciliating, as she said to him,

"Come here and sit down by me, Cesare mio! I have a word to say to you."

"Must I not dress for dinner?"

"There is time enough. Come here for a moment."

He obeyed. Seating himself beside her, he pressed her hand to his lips. It was very thin and burnt with a feverish heat.

"*Cara!*" he said, touched with a vague pity as he looked at the wasted little fingers on which the sparkling rings sat so loosely. "If you would always be kind to me, I would rather stay here with you, than divert myself with those other women!"

"Ah, you would get tired of staying here with me, Cesare! And I do not wish you to do so. But I like to hear you say so. Do you really love me, Cesare?"

"Ma sì!"

"I had a visitor whilst you were out this afternoon; an unexpected visitor."

"Il Vicario? No?—It was not that accursed doctor?"

"Oh, Cesare! Why should you speak so of poor Mr. Plew? He is the best-hearted little fellow in the world. What reason on earth have you to dislike him?"

"How can I tell? It is an antipathy I suppose. With his insipid face, and his eyes like your English sky, neither blue nor grey, mi par tanto sciocco! He attacks my nerves. Well it was *not* he?"

Veronica made an effort to suppress an angry reply.

"It was Mr. Frost," she answered, shortly; not trusting her self-control to say more at that instant.

"Mr. Frost! Davvero!—Mr. Frost! Ah il povero Frost! He was très bon enfant at Naples: and what was better—a very good lawyer!"

"He is in trouble."

"Si, eh?" said Cesare, whose interest in this announcement did not appear to be keen.

"And I have promised to help him."

"Oh! that was very kind of you," observed Cesare, with a shade of surprise, that yet was not lively enough to rouse him to any great demonstration of caring about what Veronica was saying.

"Yes: I have promised to lend him some money."

"*What?*" He was not indifferent now. "You are jesting! Lend Mr. Frost money!"

"I, too, was surprised at his request."

"What was it? How was it? Oh!" exclaimed Cesare, struck by a sudden idea, "perhaps he had forgotten his pocket-book, and wanted a few pounds. Were you able to give them to him?"

"Then you would not have objected to my doing so?"

"Diamine! *In that case*, no."

"I am glad of that," said Veronica, ignoring the words in italics, "because I promised to assist him. It is a large sum he wants. But we can afford it, I suppose. I never enter into the details of our fortune, but I make no doubt that it will not be difficult for us. In serving him, I shall be indirectly

serving others in whom I am interested. I do not exactly understand how ; but if you were to ask him he might tell you more explicitly. I was greatly struck by the change in Mr. Frost's appearance. He seems to have been harassed nearly to death. But if you had seen the light that came into his face when I said 'Yes'! It gave me quite a new sensation. I do not think I have ever relieved a single sorrow with my money since I became possessed of it! I promised to lend him two thousand pounds!"

Cesare had sat silent and attentive, listening to his wife with growing uneasiness in his face. At these last words he jumped up and uttered a loud ejaculation. But in the next instant he burst into a mocking laugh.

"Sommi dei!" he cried, "what a fool I am! You made me believe you were in earnest."

But even as he said the words his angry face belied them.

"I am in earnest, Cesare."

For all reply he laughed again, more mockingly than before, and began to walk up and down the room, switching his riding-whip right and left with a sharp vicious motion.

Veronica proceeded to recapitulate Mr.

Frost's words as well as she could remember them. She spoke earnestly and eagerly. At length, finding that she made no impression on her husband, she began to lose patience. "It would be somewhat less grossly ill-bred and discourteous," she said, "if you were to favour me with your objections, if you do object, instead of sneering and strutting in that intolerable manner."

"My objections are that the whole idea is contrary to common sense. These are contes de la mère l'Oie. Tu sei pazza—you are mad, mia cara."

"How contrary to common sense? I do not think it at all contrary to common sense."

"You do not see, for example, that this man must be at the last extremity before he would attempt such a desperate forlorn hope as this? That he must be as good as ruined already? Tu sei pazza!"

"But if we could save him—and others?"

"Pazza, pazza, pazza!"

"Cesare, I gave him my promise."

"You must have been bewitched, or—*dreaming* when you gave it," he answered with a singular look.

"After all, the money is mine, and I choose

to claim the disposal of it," she cried, her long-repressed resentment blazing out on her cheeks and in her eyes.

Cesare wheeled sharp round in his walk, and looked at her.

"Do you know," he said slowly, "I begin to be afraid that you really are not in possession of your senses."

"I am in full possession of my senses. I despise your sneer. I despise *you*; yes, I despise you! I will not forfeit my word to please your grudging, petty meanness! The money is mine—mine, I tell you. And I *will* have some share in the bestowal of it."

Then he let the demon of rage take full possession of him. From between his clenched teeth he hissed out such words as speedily made her quail and shudder and sink down, burying her head among the cushions of the couch. He had learnt much during the past three months, both of her position and his own in the eyes of the world; and he spared her no detail of his knowledge. He knew his privileges; he knew that there was nothing in all the world which she could call her own: and he also knew that his name and title were looked on as more than equivalent for the surrender of herself and all she possessed.

He had lately had increasing reason to be displeased with her. His new friends did not love her. They resented her pride, and ridiculed her pretensions. A hundred taunts which, but for the accidental firing of the long train of discontents, and spites, and vexations, might have remained for ever unspoken, leaped from his tongue. His passion grew with speech, as a smouldering fire rushes into flame at the contact of the outer air. He turned and twisted the elastic riding-whip ferociously in his hands as though it were a living thing that he took pleasure in torturing. And at length, approaching nearer and nearer to Veronica as she cowered on the sofa, bending closer and closer over her, and hissing his fierce invectives into her ear, he suddenly drew himself upright, whirled the twisted whip with a crash into the midst of some porcelain toys that stood on a distant table, and dashed headlong from the room.

CHAPTER XII.

IN TIME.

MR. LOVEGROVE was very uneasy in his mind. His uneasiness was not the less irksome in that he confided it to no one. A small circumstance had put the climax to a heap of doubts and suspicions which had long been accumulating. It may be remembered that Mr. Lovegrove had expressed to his partner his desire to have a little confidential talk with him, and that his partner had expressed himself perfectly willing that the confidential talk should take place. It had not yet taken place, however. Mr. Frost always found some excuse for postponing it.

On the same day on which Mr. Lovegrove had first spoken of this desire on his part, it may also be remembered that a sum of money just received by the firm had been taken away by Mr. Frost, to bank, as he said. Mr. Love-

grove had asked him about it later, and Mr. Frost had answered, Oh yes; it was all right. And there the matter had dropped. But two days after Mr. Frost's visit to the Princess de' Barletti, Mr. Lovegrove made the very disagreeable discovery that the money in question had never been paid into the bank at all! The sum was an insignificant one after all; and could he have looked upon the circumstance as a mere instance of carelessness and forgetfulness on the part of Mr. Frost, he would have been irritated and annoyed by it, certainly, but he would have felt no more serious distress than those epithets might convey. But Mr. Frost, when questioned, had not clapped his hand to his forehead and exclaimed that the matter had slipped his memory: he had not even acknowledged that he had not yet paid the money, and promised that he would remedy the omission. He had answered with composure that the matter was all right. Mr. Frost, then, had told his partner a lie. Mr. Lovegrove was more hurt by this discovery than he would willingly have acknowledged. He had a very strong attachment to Sidney Frost. He had the habit of looking up to his talents and character with much the same admiring delight with which

an ingenuous little boy contemplates the cock of his school. Though at the same time Mr. Lovegrove understood very well what were the solid plodding qualities in which he himself excelled his partner, and which were especially useful to the success of their joint affairs.

Mr. Lovegrove knew himself to be a plain man—plain in looks, plain in mind, and plain in manners.

But he had great pride and delight in Mr. Frost's brilliant superiority on all these points.

If one might dare to hint at the existence of anything like romance in the regard of one middle-aged lawyer for another, it might almost be said that Mr. Lovegrove's feeling for his friend was romantic. And be it understood, that there was no human being on the face of the earth who would have more derisively scouted such an idea, could it have been broached to him, than Mr. Lovegrove himself. Mr. Lovegrove had no sooner made the discovery above-mentioned, than he resolved with an inflexible resolution to lose no more time in coming to an explanation with his partner. The discovery was made after

office hours. Mr. Frost, had, therefore, already left Bedford-square. The junior partner debated with himself what measures he should take in order to carry out the purpose he had formed. Mr. Lovegrove having once formed a purpose, never permitted himself to discuss *whether or no* he should carry it out: he merely considered *how* he should fulfil it, which was one of the results of the smallness of his faculty of imagination—and also one of the secrets of his success in life.

"Sarah, my dear," said he to his wife, after tea, "I am going over to Bayswater this evening."

"To a party?" demanded Mrs. Lovegrove, with a rapid jealous notion that her long-nourished suspicions of Mrs. Frost's intention to insult her unmistakably had at length been confirmed.

"To a party! My dear Sarah, what are you dreaming of? Do I ever go to a party without you? And is it likely that the Frosts would invite me alone?"

Mrs. Lovegrove, a little ashamed of her too hasty conclusion, murmured something to the effect that there was no knowing what "that woman" might not do.

"But I am not going to see 'that woman ;' I am going to see 'that man.' My visit is solely on business."

"It's a strange hour to have a business appointment. I think, Augustus, that you might consecrate your evenings to domestic peace! I'm sure you work hard enough in the day, poor old Gus!" said Mrs. Lovegrove.

The lady's sudden descent from the regions of lofty severity to undignified and familiar affection, was due to the pressure of her husband's arm encircling her waist and the touch of her husband's lips on her forehead.

"You know I never want to leave you and the girls, Sally. But I want to speak to Frost particularly. I must speak with him. Give me a kiss, Sally. I don't go because I like going, and I shan't spend a pleasant time, you may depend on it."

Mrs. Lovegrove was very sincerely fond of her husband ; and as she marked his face and gauged the tone of his voice—every vibration of which had become known to her as thoroughly as those things are known which love teaches, behind the accuracy of whose instructions all other powers and passions limp at a long distance—she perceived that there was,

as she phrased it, "something on his mind." And she refrained from saying another provoking word to add to the burden. Mr. Lovegrove walked part of the way towards Bayswater, meaning to pursue his journey from a certain point in the omnibus. But the night was fine, and the walk was agreeable to the lawyer after his day spent busily in a hot close office; and he therefore strolled on and on, until he found that he might as well proceed to his destination on foot. Thus, as it turned out, it was close on ten o'clock by the time he reached Mr. Frost's house in Bayswater. He had no need to knock or ring for admittance. The street door was open, and a couple of servants—a man and woman—were lounging on the steps enjoying the evening air.

"Is Mr. Frost within?" asked Lovegrove, almost fearing to be answered in the negative.

"*Mr.*—not *Mrs.*?" asked the man, who did not at first recognise Mr. Lovegrove. The visits of the latter to Bayswater were not frequent enough to render his face very familiar to the servants there.

"*Mr.* Frost. I wish to see your master if he is at home."

"Oh, Mr. Lovegrove! I beg pardon, sir, I asked because my mistress is gone. I suppose you know."

"Gone! Good Heavens, not dead?"

"Oh no, sir; but she has left master, sir. I shouldn't say anything only you're of course so intimate, and such a friend."

"I had heard nothing! I had no idea! Perhaps you are mistaken. Mrs. Frost has merely gone on a visit—for a time. It *can't* be!"

"Well, sir, I'm afraid you'll find it is true. As for our knowing it, why, we couldn't help ourselves. The next-door neighbours might have known it—very likely they do." (The speaker had already discussed the affair in its minutest details with half the servants in the neighbourhood.) "And I'm glad you've chanced to come up to-night, sir, for master's in a awful state—indeed, I thought that was what you come for."

Mr. Lovegrove was in much consternation.

"Do you think I had better try to see him?" he asked, doubtfully.

The very fact of his asking the servant's opinion would have sufficed to prove to any one who knew Mr. Lovegrove the extraordinary perturbation of his spirit.

"I think you had, sir. *Some one* ought to see him. He's shut hisself up in his study since six o'clock, and wouldn't take food, nor do nothing. Half an hour ago he opened his door and called to us that we might go to bed, and shut up the house as soon as we liked. We weren't to go near him again. He wanted nothing."

"I will go in," said Mr. Lovegrove, with decision. "I don't want you. I know my way."

The door of the little room behind the dining-room, which Mr. Frost occupied as his study, was shut. Mr. Lovegrove approached it and paused, hesitating whether or not he should knock for admission. But after a moment, he turned the handle and went in.

Frost was sitting at a table with writing materials upon it. A tumbler with some brandy in it stood by his right hand. On the other side was placed a polished wooden box of peculiar shape. Before him lay two or three sheets of letter-paper closely covered with writing. At the opening of the door he looked up quietly, and tossed some papers over the box that stood on the table. He had expected to see the servant merely. When he recognised Lovegrove, his face changed, and

he looked at him fixedly without speaking. Lovegrove had no need to ask a question. The haggard countenance that met his eyes, with the light of the lamp falling full on it, was confirmation stronger than words that the servant had not exaggerated the state of matters.

"Frost!" he said, and held out his hand.
• The other did not take it. "So you have heard!" he said, hoarsely.

"Only this instant! I was more overwhelmed—more amazed than I can say. I—I had some hope that the man—your servant—had misstated in some way. But I fear—My dear Frost, I feel for you if ever one man felt for another. I do upon my soul."

"Why did you come here then?" asked Mr. Frost, in the same monotonous hoarse voice.

"I came—no matter now for the business that brought me here. I cannot harass you with it now. But, Frost, you must not break down in this way! For all sakes you must take courage!"

"Break down!" echoed Frost, in precisely the same tone and manner as before, "no: I have not broken down."

"This," said Lovegrove, pointing to the brandy, "is a bad comforter, and a worse

counsellor. You should take food ; and perhaps a glass of sherry when you have eaten. God bless my soul, I—I—feel like a man in a dreadful dream ! When did it happen ? I mean when did—did she——”

“She went away this afternoon. She was gone when I came home from the office. She took her maid, and her jewels, and her clothes. She was very fond of her clothes. They were the only objects that ever touched her affections.” Sidney Frost laughed a short laugh as he said the last words : a laugh that made the man opposite to him shiver.

“For Heaven’s sake, man, don’t—don’t laugh ! If that hideous sound can be termed a laugh. Then she—Mrs. Frost—did she go *alone* ?”

“I tell you she was accompanied by all that she loved in the world ! But you mean, did she elope ? Did she leave me for a lover ? Did she disgrace herself ? Oh no ! Not so. I would have you to understand that Mrs. Frost is a woman of spotless virtue—spotless, spotless virtue ! She only breaks her husband’s heart ; but in nowise tarnishes his honour.”

And again the horrible laugh sounded through the room.

"Here is her letter. She left a letter. That was very considerate, was it not? Would you like to read it?"

Frost tossed a letter across the table to his partner, and then, leaning his elbows on the table, buried his face in his hands. Mr. Lovegrove read the letter slowly and attentively. When he had finished it, he threw it down with an expression of disgust, and something like an oath rose to his lips.

"By G——! such heartlessness is incredible!"

Georgina Frost had left her home as her husband had said, taking with her her jewels and the greater part of her costly wardrobe. She wrote that her life had long been intolerable to her; that her husband was either a ruined man, or was growing rapidly to a pitch of parsimony which threatened to become a monomania.

In the first case he would be relieved by her absence; in the second, she must decline to make herself a victim to his avarice and his temper. She was going to her mother and her widowed sister, who resided abroad. They would willingly receive her. Her mother's property would eventually be hers, and she had no scruple in accepting a home with her

parent. If brighter days should come, they might meet again. But Sidney must be aware that his conduct and temper during the past three months had been such as to alienate her affection to a great extent. Indeed, there were moments when she had feared personal violence. He would scarcely be surprised—if indeed he were *at all surprised*—at the step she had taken. And she remained his affectionate and unhappy wife.

“Frost,” said Mr. Lovegrove, laying his hand on the forsaken husband’s arm, “you said something about a broken heart. You are not going to break your heart for a woman who could write such a letter as that!”

Mr. Frost looked up at him with a ghastly face. His features writhed and worked convulsively, but no tears fell from his hot eyes.

“What is the use of your talking?” he gasped out. “You did not love her. She was not your wife, your life, your idol. All these years that she lay in my bosom I loved her more and more day by day. I had not a thought or a hope or a wish that did not tend to her pleasure and comfort and happiness. I knew she did not love me as I loved her. How could she? How could any woman have the strength to love as I loved her? But I

thought she had some gleam of kindness for me—some human pity! Not break my heart! It *is* broken, and crushed, and dead. The light has gone out of my life.”

“Sidney Frost,” exclaimed Lovegrove, suddenly, springing up and laying his hand on the wooden box, the significance of which had at that moment flashed on his mind for the first time, “I thank Almighty God that I came here to-night to save you from an awful crime. Give me the pistol-case. I will have it. I am not afraid of you. Sit down. Sit down, and sit still. And listen to me!”

After a brief and unavailing struggle—for his strength was worn out, and he was, although a powerfully built man, no match just then for the other’s cool determined energy—Frost obeyed. He sank back into his chair, and a great burst of tears came to relieve his overcharged brain. Then Lovegrove talked to him gently and firmly. Mr. Lovegrove was not a man of commanding intellect; and he used many arguments at which Sidney had been accustomed to scoff, less from conviction, than a careless irreverent tone of mind to which cynicism appeared a short and easy method of cutting sundry Gordian knots that could not be unravelled. But Lovegrove pos-

sessed the enormous advantages of thoroughly believing what he said, and of speaking with a heartfelt interest in the man he addressed. Gradually Frost grew calmer. He said nothing, but he listened at least with patience: and once he put out his hand, with his face turned away, and pressed the other man's for a moment.

"You—you do not know all," he faltered at length, when Lovegrove paused.

"Confide in me, Frost, I beseech you! We have known each other many years. We have always been friends, have we not? Confide in me fully. You will not repent doing so."

"I had written to you—a farewell letter—a letter of explanation. I had thought it would meet no human eye until I should be out of reach of—— Well, I had made a clean breast of it. You may see it, if you will. It matters little. I am past caring for anything, I think. But I have a dull dim sense of your goodness, Lovegrove. I *think* you are a good fellow."

Poor Mr. Lovegrove had little conception of the revelations that awaited him. His first act was to ring for the servant. He stood at the door of the room to prevent the man from entering it. When the servant appeared he

bade him bring a tray with food :—cold meat, or whatever could be had, he said, and a little wine, and bread. This tray when it was brought he received at the door, and set before his partner with his own hands. Then he shut the door, and standing over Frost, commanded him peremptorily to eat. Having seen the latter reluctantly swallow one or two mouthfuls, Mr. Lovegrove sat down with the pistol-case under his elbow, to peruse the closely-written sheets of his partner's confession. More than once, during the perusal, Mr. Lovegrove wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and breathed hard, like a man undergoing severe bodily exertion. But he read on, with a steady, silent perseverance, little less than heroic. Frost had, indeed, as he had said, made a clean breast of it.

The reader is already acquainted with the main points of the confession. He acknowledged his fraud in depriving Hugh Lockwood of his rightful inheritance during so many years—merely suppressing, with a lingering trait of the generous honour he had once possessed, and which he had forfeited for the wife who had deserted him, Zillah's part in the deception of her husband and her son. Then came a record of disastrous

speculations, recklessly entered into, in the spirit of an unsuccessful gambler, who throws one stake to bring back another, and with the object of supplying the extravagant expenditure of his household. Debts pressed on every side. Latterly, there had been the threat of disgrace and exposure should he fail to refund Hugh Lockwood's money. There had been a temporary gleam of hope when his attempt to borrow from Veronica had seemed crowned with success. The affairs of the wretched Parthenope Company had also, just at that time, flickered up into brightness. But a few hours had wrested this last hope from him. He received from Cesare a note, couched in the most courteous, and almost affectionate terms, regretting much that the Principessa had been led by an impulse of sympathy (which Cesare begged to say, he thoroughly shared) into promising that which it was out of their power to perform. Their expenses had been very heavy. And Mr. Frost was aware that the fortune inherited by Sir John Gale's widow represented only a comparatively small portion of the late baronet's wealth. In brief, Prince Cesare was deeply afflicted, but he could not lend Mr. Frost a guinea; and he trusted with all his

heart that the latter would speedily tide over his embarrassments.

After getting this note, Frost confessed that he had almost despaired. There was but one motive left to induce him to struggle on—Georgina. He reached his home, and found that she had fled from the falling house. Her letter, proving beyond all possibility of self-delusion that her heart was entirely hardened against him, had broken down the last remnant of his courage, and he had resolved, as Lovegrove had divined, to die by his own hand. Mr. Lovegrove thought long and anxiously as to the course it behoved him to follow; and at length, after a conversation which lasted far into the night, he made the following propositions to Mr. Frost. First, that the latter should retire from the partnership, giving up his share of the business to Augustus, who was now qualified to take it. For this concession, Mr. Lovegrove would undertake at once to settle Hugh Lockwood's claim, and to make such other advances as might be agreed on hereafter. Secondly, Frost was to give his word that he would, as soon as his retirement from the firm of Frost and Lovegrove should be announced, call a meeting of his creditors, and lay his affairs

candidly before them. If a composition was found to be impracticable, he must then become a bankrupt: but in an open and upright manner, giving up whatsoever property he had, without reserve.

Thus the disgrace of having the name of one of its members in the gazette would be averted from the firm, which point weighed a good deal with Mr. Lovegrove. Finally, Mr. Lovegrove would undertake to assist his former partner in any way that might seem on due consideration to be advisable, and within the limits of what he (Lovegrove) considered compatible with justice to his own family. All this Mr. Lovegrove set forth at length, and with a clearness of statement which, even in that depth of misery and despair in which he found himself, impressed Frost with the conviction that he had hitherto a little underestimated his partner's powers of mind.

"I am not in the least a sentimental man, you know, Frost," said Mr. Lovegrove. "And I do not pretend that in proposing these arrangements I am not as far as is fair and practicable consulting my own interests."

Nevertheless, the fact was that the junior partner was willing to make more than one sacrifice for the senior, and to treat him with

generosity. But Mr. Lovegrove would have been much angered had he been taxed with any such weakness as a tender desire to spare Sidney Frost's feelings at the expense of solid advantage to himself. Frost was broken down in mind and body. He had no will to oppose to that of his friend. And he knew in his heart that the other man was using his position with forbearing kindness. He agreed to all.

Mr. Lovegrove deemed it his duty to admonish Mr. Frost once more with some sternness on the fatal intention he had entertained.

"Suicide," said he, "is not only criminal, but cowardly. A man of your sort has better things to do than to die like a dog, because he finds life hard."

He extorted from Frost a solemn promise that he would make no further attempt on his own life. And he did not leave him, until he had seen him prepared for his night's rest.

"I think he will sleep," thought Mr. Lovegrove. "Nature is wearied out. And I believe there is no further fear of—*that!*"

Nevertheless, before quitting the house, Mr. Lovegrove took the precaution of plunging the loaded pistols into a basin of water, and then locking them up in the case damp and dripping as they were.

CHAPTER XIII.

ZILLAH'S RESOLUTION.

"MOTHER!" cried Hugh Lockwood, coming hastily into the little parlour in Gower-street, and taking his mother in his arms, "good news, mother! Let me see your dear face a little brighter than it has been this long time. There is good news for you, little mother, do you hear?"

"Good news for me? *That* can only mean good news for you, my son!" replied Zillah, unconsciously epitomising all her widowed life in the sentence.

"Of course, good for me, good for you, good for Maud. Darling Maud! Kiss me, mother."

Then he told her that Mr. Frost had that day informed him by letter that the sum of money borrowed from his late father—so the note was worded—plus the interest on the

capital during the last twenty-five years, was lying at his disposal at Mr. Lovegrove's office in Bedford-square, and that on his personal application it would be handed over to him.

"Why, mother, it is more than I hoped to get out of the fire. Five per cent. for twenty-five years! It will more than double the original sum!"

"Oh, thank God! My Hugh, my Hugh, what a weight of remorse is taken from my heart! And he has done well, after all, poor Sidney!"

"Done well? Not at all," said Hugh, whose sense of justice was not obfuscated by his joy as his mother's was. "Very far from well he has done, mother. Five per cent. on the capital every year is the very least that could pretend to approach fair dealing—and, in fact, nothing can make his conduct out to be fair. But he has done better than I expected; and I am very glad and thankful, and mean to think of nothing but the bright side of things, I assure you."

When Hugh went to receive his money, he perceived that the brass plate on the outer door, which usually stood open during office hours, had been removed, and a man was painting out the black letters on a drab

ground on the door-post, which formed the words, "Messrs. Frost and Lovegrove, Solicitors." Hugh was shown into Mr. Lovegrove's office, and received by that gentleman in person.

"The last time we met in this office, Mr. Lockwood," said the lawyer, "your errand here was to repudiate a fortune. Now you come to receive—well, not a fortune, perhaps, but a sum of money that in my young days would have been looked upon as affording a very pretty start in life. I am glad of it, and wish you every success."

"Thank you heartily."

"You have—ahem!—you have Mr. Frost's acknowledgment for the money lent by your father, Mr. Lockwood?"

Hugh took from his pocket-book a yellow bit of paper with some words in Sidney Frost's bold clear writing upon it. At one corner of the paper there was a green stain, and near it the impression of a thumb in red paint.

"Here it is, Mr. Lovegrove. My poor father must have been at work in his studio when that paper was written. It is marked with the traces of his calling."

"H'm!" said Mr. Lovegrove, examining

the paper gravely. "A sadly informal document. Ha! well, here is the money, Mr. Lockwood. Will you be kind enough to count the notes in the presence of my clerk? Just step here for a moment, if you please, Mr. Burgess."

"It is all quite right, sir," said Hugh, when this had been done. Then, when the clerk left the room, he said, with a slight hesitation, "I don't know how intimate your knowledge of Mr. Frost's private affairs may have been, but I cannot help entertaining an idea that I owe the recovery of this money mainly to your influence, Mr. Lovegrove."

"As to my knowledge of the state of Mr. Frost's private fortune, it is now, I may say, *extremely* intimate. But I have only quite recently learned the existence of this debt to you. And—Mr. Lockwood, I make no excuses for my partner. But I—I—I will confess to you that it hurts me to hear any one hard upon him. And there were certain palliations—certain palliations. His domestic relations were unfortunate. Upon my word, when I see the quantity of mischief that women are capable of causing, I feel thankful, positively most truly thankful, that they don't

exercise their power more ruthlessly than they do!"

Hugh smiled. "You have had a happy experience of the sex yourself, sir," said he.

"Why, yes. My mother was an excellent woman, and my wife is an excellent woman, and my girls are good, sound-hearted girls as you'll find any where, thank God! And I most firmly believe, Mr. Lockwood, that the young lady whom you are about to marry is an ornament to her sex. You love her and respect her very much now, I have not the least doubt. But, take my word for it, that you will love her and respect her more when she has been your wife some dozen years! Oh, of course, that seems impossible! Yes, yes, I know. I suppose you will be married very soon now?"

"As soon as possible!" said Hugh, with much energy. "Oh, by-the-bye, Mr. Lovegrove, I see they are painting out the name of the firm on your door-post. Are you going to make any change in the style and title of it?"

"Yes; a considerable change. Mr. Frost retires from the business altogether—the deeds were signed this morning—and the firm will

henceforth be known as Lovegrove and Lovegrove."

"All success to it under its new name, say I. But I had not heard that this was in contemplation."

Mr. Lovegrove proceeded to narrate as briefly as might be the misfortunes that had, as he said, determined Mr. Frost to give up business—so much, that is, of his misfortunes as must inevitably become matter of public notoriety. He spared his old partner as much as possible in the narrative. But he did not by any means spare his old partner's wife, to whom indeed he was inclined to attribute everything that had gone ill, even to the total smash and failure of the Parthenope Embellishment Company, which had become matter of public notoriety within the last week.

Hugh was much shocked. And his good opinion of Mr. Lovegrove was greatly enhanced by the feeling he evinced for his old friend.

"He is really a most superior man, Mr. Lockwood. I don't know a more superior man than Sidney Frost is—or *was*—was, alas! He is a wreck now, sir. You wouldn't know him. I want to send him off to Cannes or

Nice, or some of those places for the winter. He has given up everything most honourably to his creditors, and they have not behaved badly. They understood to a man whose door to lay the extravagance at. Anything like that woman—— However, it is unavailing to dilate upon *that*. But when all is done there will be a small—a small annuity remaining, which will suffice to maintain Frost in comfort at some of those southern places. Ah, bless my soul, *what* a superior man he was when I first knew him!"

Mr. Lovegrove did not say that the "small annuity" was to come entirely out of his own pocket, and that its amount caused him sundry twinges of conscience when he looked at his wife and children.

"Well, Mr. Lovegrove, I hope that one of the first transactions of the new firm will be to draw up my marriage settlement. And I shall ask you to continue to look after Maud's interests. Perhaps Captain Sheardown will be the other trustee?"

"I shall be delighted. You intend to have Miss Desmond's little bit of money settled entirely on herself?"

"To be sure I do! I won't detain you any longer. Your time is precious, and I suppose

you can guess in which direction *my* steps are to be bent. I long to see Maudie's face flush and brighten when I tell her my news. Good-bye."

Maud's face did flush and brighten in a manner which may be supposed to have been entirely satisfactory to her lover. But it also expressed much pity for Mr. Frost when she heard his story.

Hugh merely informed her that Mr. Frost had at length paid an old debt that had been due to his (Hugh's) father; and that having entertained but slender hopes of ever receiving the money, he had deemed it best to say nothing about it to her, lest she might suffer disappointment.

"Oh, poor, poor man! How dreadful to be deserted by his own wife! The very one person in all the world he might have hoped to rely on for comfort and sympathy in his troubles. I have seen her. She is a very beautiful woman. But, oh how cruel and heartless she must be!"

"Let it be a warning to you not to suffer your affections to be engrossed by millinery, and to keep your husband in the first place in your heart, Mrs. Hugh Lockwood!"

The Sheardowns were scarcely less delighted .

than Hugh himself. The captain insisted that the wedding should take place from Lowater House.

"But ought I not—don't you think—what will Uncle Charles say?" Maud asked, hesitatingly.

"Do you think, my dearest, that your guardian will be hurt if you are not married from his roof?"

"I—I'm afraid so," said Maud.

"Well, I will write and ask his permission to let it be from Lowater," said the captain.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Sheardown, thoughtfully, "it would be best, after all, for Maud to be married in London, if she will, and go down to Shipley after the ceremony. Would you consent to that, Maudie?"

Maud thought she would consent to that.

If all had gone differently, she would have liked to be married in the ancient village church that she had worshipped in from childhood. But now there would be too many painful associations connected with St. Gildas! She would miss Veronica's face beaming out from its accustomed corner; she would miss Veronica's voice in the bridal hymn of the choir. It would call up in the vicar's mind all that was sad and terrible in his daughter's

fate. No: it would be better to be married in town. And, after all, it mattered very little to herself. Hugh would be there. Hugh would take care of her. Hugh would love her. Could anything matter very much as long as she had Hugh? Mrs. Sheardown took an opportunity of drawing Hugh aside, and explaining to him her reasons for thinking that the vicar of Shipley-in-the-Wold would be rather relieved than offended by getting rid of the spectacle of his ward's wedding. Meanwhile there was much to be done. A letter had to be written to the architect whose business Hugh intended to purchase. A friend in the neighbourhood of Danecester was to be commissioned to look out for a house for the young couple. The house must have a garden, at any rate, and, if possible, a little stable for a pony and pony-carriage, which Hugh intended to purchase for the use of his wife. Though this latter desideratum, he observed smilingly, he could build for himself, if need were. And there must be a cottage found in the neighbourhood for Mrs. Lockwood.

But when he spoke of this to his mother, she met him with a request that he would leave that part of his arrangements which concerned her in abeyance for awhile.

"But, mother, darling, why? Surely you mean to live near us, don't you?"

"Perhaps not, Hugh. Don't ask me any more at present. I may have something to tell you by-and-bye. You need not look uneasy. It is nothing terrible. I will not deceive you—*again*."

At the end of a fortnight, and when the day fixed for the wedding was near at hand, Zillah Lockwood made the confidence she had announced to her son.

"Hugh," said she, "I have become a Roman Catholic."

"A Roman Catholic! Mother!"

"Yes: I humbly hope to find peace and forgiveness in the bosom of the Church. I shall at least be able to make some expiation, and to pray for those whom I love. Rome does not reject the humble pious efforts after goodness of the faithful, as your stern Calvinistic creed does. I always, when I was a girl in Paris, had a great admiration for the good religieuses, and was attracted by them. The seed of their blessed example has borne fruit in my soul. The price of this house, which your father bequeathed to me, will suffice to gain me admission into a poor order whose members devote themselves to the sick

poor. On the day of your marriage I shall become a member—an unworthy and humble member—of a pious sisterhood in Belgium. The good priest, who has been enlightening my dark mind with the comfortable truths of religion, will make all the necessary arrangements for me. I shall pray fervently for you, my son, and for your sweet young wife. And all I ask of you, Hugh, is to make me one promise. If ever you feel your heart drawn towards the ancient and holy Mother Church, do not resist the impulse. It may be that it comes from Heaven, in answer to the petitions of the earthly mother who bore you.”

Nor could any expostulations or entreaties shake Zillah’s determination. Hugh was greatly distressed by it. But wise, kind, Nelly Sheardown consoled and comforted him.

“My dear Hugh,” she said, “your mother will be happier in following this life than in any other which you could give her. I do not know Mrs. Lockwood’s history; but she gives me the idea of a woman who has suffered much, and who is continually tormented by the contentions of pride with a very singularly sensitive conscience.”

"You describe my mother with wonderful accuracy. How could you learn to know her so well?"

"Well, you know, Maud has talked to me of her much. Maud is as clear as crystal, and the impression she received of your mother she faithfully transmitted to me. Your mother has been accustomed to reign paramount in your affections ; when you are married, that could, of course, no longer be the case. Indeed, it has already ceased to be the case. Mrs. Lockwood, in living near you, would be continually tormented by a proud jealousy of Maud's influence over you ; and equally tormented by a conscientious sense of the wrongness of such a feeling. In her convent, in her care of the sick, and her devotion to good works, she will feel that her life is not useless and wasted, and that if even *only* by her prayers, still by her prayers she may serve you and yours."

So Zillah had her way without further opposition, and her two children, as she called them, were surprised by the air of serenity and cheerfulness which had succeeded to her old *repressed* look ; the expression of one who had indeed resolved to be calm, but who paid a

heavy price for the carrying out of her resolution. But the chief secret of this change in her was, that her new creed recommended itself to her notion of justice, always throughout her life unsatisfied. According to this creed her sufferings would *count in her favour*. Every prayer, every privation, every penance, would be registered to her credit in the records of the Great Tribunal. She would suffer perhaps—yes; but she would not at least suffer *in vain*. And this thought conciliated Zillah's rebellious soul with the decrees of Providence, and in it her weary spirit found peace.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAST PLANK.

VERONICA was more wretched than she had ever yet been after the scene in which Cesare had asserted his masterhood over her and her fortune. She had fancied a week before that she could hardly be more unhappy than she then was. But she was doomed to taste a yet bitterer cup. It was bitter, with a bitterness at which her soul shuddered to see herself so treated by one who had been the slave of her caprices, and had sworn that he loved her better than his own life. Men were all tyrants; all base, and fickle, and cruel. All, all, all—— No, stay! Did she not know one man who was none of these things? One obscure, humble man whom she had disdained and derided in her old happy days. Happy days? Oh yes, how happy, how heavenly, in comparison with these! And

she had been discontented and complaining then? *How* could it have been? She must have been mad. Why had no one taught her, warned her, helped her? Oh, if the past could but come back!

"Come back, come back, come back!" she cried aloud, with outstretched arms; and then crouched down sobbing and wailing in her misery.

The thought of Mr. Plew, however, came to strengthen an idea that had been vaguely floating in her mind. What if she could be separated from Cesare! She would give him half her fortune—— Give him! Had he not said himself that all she had was his? No; she could give him nothing. But might he not consent to some arrangement being made? She did not love him now. She detested him, and she feared him. It was dreadful so to fear one with whom one lived one's daily life! She could not appeal to her father. He would do nothing. He would reproach her, and would not help her. She doubted even if he could. He seemed to have lost all energy. But Mr. Plew! Perhaps! She would write to Mr. Plew. When she had half finished her letter, she remembered that his mother was recently dead, and that he, too,

must be in affliction. She tried to say some word of condolence. But it was flat and unmeaning. She could think of no grief, she could feel no sorrow save her own. Would the fact of his mother's death prevent his attending to her letter? No: surely not. It might even leave him freer to serve her. In any case she must send the letter. It was her last chance. Three days elapsed, and no answer came. She had reckoned that she might receive an answer on the afternoon of the third day. When the time passed, and brought no reply, her heart sank wofully.

"Has he forgotten me?" she thought, and clasped her hands together until her sharp rings drew blood from the soft flesh.

But that night—it was nine o'clock, Cesare was absent, as he was most evenings except when he had company at home, and Veronica, declining to accompany him, was at home in solitude—that same night there came a gentle ring at the bell, and the servant who answered it presently came up-stairs with an insolent half-suppressed smile of amusement on his face, and announced "Mr. Plew." Veronica by a great effort sat still on her accustomed sofa until the man had disappeared, but no sooner had he closed the door than she rushed

to the little surgeon, and almost threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, God bless you for coming! I was fretting that you did not write, but it is better—how much better—that you have come yourself! I did not dare to hope *that!*"

The tears gathered in his eyes. That she should be so overjoyed to see *him!* The fact, thought Mr. Plew in his unselfishness and humility, was more eloquent than words to express the utterness of her desolation.

"Yes, princess——"

"Call me Veronica."

"Yes, Veronica. I came, because I could speak to you better than I could write. And I have much to say."

He looked very pale and woe-begone in his black clothes.

"I was sorry to hear of your loss," she said, glancing at his mourning garments.

"Ah, my poor mother! She did not suffer much. And I—I did what I could to make her life happy."

"You have only just arrived. You must want food. Let me get you something."

"I do not feel as though I wanted food, but on principle, and to set you a good example, I will try to eat something. It is not well to

fast too long. And if I am knocked up, I can't do any good. I must be in possession of what energy and faculty I possess."

Veronica gave her orders. There was a difficulty in executing them. Wine there was, certainly, of various kinds; but as to supper, Madame la Princesse did not usually take supper. They did not know; they could not say that there was anything provided!

"Get some supper, immediately!" said Veronica, imperiously.

Her command was literally obeyed. A nondescript subordinate who served the servants was despatched to buy some cooked meat. It was sent up on a porcelain dish, flanked by two flasks of rare wine, and served with fine damask, and silver brave with the foreign-looking showy crest of the Barlettis. The village surgeon began to perceive that homely comfort and hospitable abundance did not always belong to the mansions of princes. In short, that things meant for human governance had an obstinate habit of declining to "govern themselves"!

"I'm afraid I have given you a good deal of trouble," said Mr. Plew, meekly.

"You see what kind of a banquet it is I am able to set before you," said Veronica.

And she added, with a bitter laugh : " When I used to come to your cottage, and have tea with your mother, she was able to give me abundance of sweet, wholesome, appetising food. But she was a poor widow in a country village. I am a princess with a grand retinue ! However, here is something that the cottage could not furnish. This is good." And she rapidly poured out two goblets full of foaming wine, and drank nearly the whole contents of one at a draught. Mr. Plew laid down his knife and fork, aghast.

" Take care, Veronica ! That is a dangerous experiment ! You have tasted no food, I'll be sworn, since dinner. And perhaps you ate but little at dinner ? Am I not right ?"

" Quite right. I never eat now. I hate eating."

" Good God !"

" Well—not quite *never* ! Don't look so. You make me laugh, in spite of everything, to see your horror-stricken face !"

But Mr. Plew showed no symptom of joining in the laugh. Timid and self-distrustful in most things—on his own ground, in matters pertaining to his profession, he could be strong, and decided, and resolute enough. What had contributed to make him so had

been that his practice lay neither among educated persons who could in some measure be trusted to understand their own maladies, nor amongst idle, fanciful, imaginary invalids, who took to being "delicate" by way of amusement, and found life uninteresting until they could succeed in persuading themselves that they ran some risk of losing it; but among the lowest ranks of the ignorant poor, who had to be cured *in spite of themselves*.

"You don't know what you are doing," said Mr. Plew, gravely; and, without the least ceremony, he took the flask away from the neighbourhood of Veronica's hand, and placed it near his own.

"Ha, mio povero Plew," she said, nodding her head at him, "you little know! This will have no effect upon me. I am past that."

"What do you mean, Veronica?" he said, sharply and sternly. "If you are joking, the joke is a very bad one. I think you are talking without rightly weighing the meaning of what you say."

"Ah, per Bacco, it is likely enough. I often do! But come, you don't eat—and you don't drink! Won't you try this wine? It isn't bad."

"What is it? I am not used to these costly vintages. I think I never tasted that kind of wine in my life before."

"That which I poured out is sparkling Moselle. The other is Hock. Which are you for?"

"Well—a little of this, I think," said Mr. Plew, filling a small wineglass full of Hock.

"Oh misericordia, don't pour the Hock into that thimble! The bigger glass—the green glass—is meant for the Hock!"

"Thank you, this will do," said Mr. Plew, sipping the wine gravely. "That effervescent stuff I should take to be very heating and unwholesome."

Veronica leaned back on her sofa cushions and looked at him. He was small, common-looking, ill-dressed, unpolished. His boots were thick and clumsy, his hands coarse and ungloved. She saw all this as keenly as she had ever seen it. But she saw also that he was good, and generous, and devoted. The only human being, she told herself, who was true to her;—the only one!

"I am so thankful you are come!" she exclaimed. The words broke from her almost involuntarily. Mr. Plew pushed his plate aside. In spite of what he had said, he had

scarcely touched the food they had set before him. Then he drew his chair so as to front her sofa, and sat with his knees a little apart, his body leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, and his hands loosely clasped together. It was a familiar attitude of his. Veronica had seen him sitting thus a hundred times in the vicarage parlour, listening to her father, and looking at herself.

"Now," said he, "let us talk seriously."

"You must not oppose my wish! You *must* not! I tell you I cannot go on living this life. I must part from Cesare. *He* will not care! Why should he? He has the money!"

As he now saw her, looking at her intently, and marking her face, her voice, her attitude, he perceived that she was greatly and deplorably changed. It cut him to the heart to see it.

"Before we speak of that, Veronica, I had best tell you something which I have it in charge to tell you."

"*In charge* to tell me? It is not about yourself then?" An unreasonable suspicion flashed through her mind that he was going to tell her he was married—or betrothed. She forgot how unlikely his very presence there

rendered such a suspicion: she forgot his mother's recent death. She only thought, "I shall lose him! He will slip through my fingers!"

Poor, wasted, fevered, clinging fingers, grasping with desperate selfishness at the kind true hand which offered the only touch of sympathy, the only chance of safety that remained to her!

"No: it is not about myself. It is news that you will, I am afraid, be vexed to hear. Your father—is married."

"Married!"

"I feared it would be disagreeable to you."

"Married! But when? Whom has he married?"

"He was married the day before yesterday to Farmer Meggitt's youngest daughter."

"Cissy Meggitt! *Cissy Meggitt!* It is impossible! Why, in the first place, Cissy is a child."

"She is very young certainly, for the vicar. But she is not exactly a child. She is turned seventeen."

"My father married to Cissy Meggitt!"

Veronica repeated the words as though they were unintelligible to her.

"You must not let it afflict you too much.

I am sorry for it, I confess. But you must hope for the best."

She remained silent and thoughtful for a few minutes, idly plucking at the lace around her sleeve.

"No," she said, at length. "I need not be afflicted. I don't know that it makes very much difference. In any case my father would not have been likely to do much to help *me*."

"Perhaps not. But I was not contemplating the event from that point of view. I was thinking, when I said I was sorry—of him," answered Mr. Plew, gently.

"Ah, yes—yes—very true—of him. I suppose he will—it will be a bad thing for papa."

Mr. Plew had dreaded an explosion of wrath and mortification on Veronica's part when she should learn her father's marriage. He knew her pride, her social ambition, her notion of her father's superiority by birth and breeding to most of those with whom he was brought into contact at Shipley. Even at Shipley the vicar's marriage was looked upon as a terrible *mésalliance*. Everybody was offended and disgusted: the gentry, that the vicar should have stooped so low; the farmers, that Cissy Meggitt should have been raised so

high. Mrs. Sack made it a text for justifying her secession from orthodoxy, and for prophesying the speedy downfall of the Establishment. The men wondered what could have bewitched rosy-cheeked Cissy Meggitt, a well-grown lass, as might have had her pick in the county, to go and tie herself up to an old man like that, and him as poor as a rat into the bargain. The women pitied the vicar, that they did. He was a fool, well and good, that they didn't gainsay. But Mrs. Meggitt's artfulness and cunning passed everything. She'd wheedled the vicar till he didn't know which end of him was uppermost. They had thought it wouldn't never come to good, having a governess, and learning to play on the pianny. And now you saw, didn't you? If the height (a mysterious and oft-reiterated charge) of Mrs. Meggitt had been unbearable before, what did you suppose it 'ud be now? Though what there was to boast on, they couldn't tell. Cissy wasn't a lady, and wouldn't never be made into one, not if she married fifty vicars!

Mr. Plew had been sent for by the vicar on the evening before the wedding, and had had a painful scene with him. Mr. Levincourt oscillated between haughty declarations that

he owed an account of his conduct to no man, and that he fully believed the step he was taking would be entirely for his happiness, and peevish lamentations over the misconduct of his daughter, who had left his home desolate and disgraced, and thus driven him to find sympathy and companionship where he could.

"Have you informed Ve—— the Princess Barletti, sir?" asked Mr. Plew.

"Informed her! No, sir, I have not informed her. I am not bound to ask my daughter's permission to take what step I please. She deserves no confidence from me—none whatever!"

But presently it appeared that the vicar very much desired that Mr. Plew should take upon himself the task of communicating the news to Veronica.

"I promised to write to you," said Mr. Plew, finishing his recital, in which he had softened all the points that were likeliest to give her pain. "But then came your letter, and I—I made up my mind to come. Mr. Brown, of Shipley Magna, promised to look after my patients for a day or two. And—there is no one else to miss me."

"Then," said Veronica, raising her eyes,

and coming out of a black reverie in which Mr. Plew's words had but faintly reached her consciousness, "I am quite alone in the world now!"

"Don't say that! Don't say that, Veronica! Your husband——"

"My husband!"

The accent with which she uttered the words was so heartbreaking in its utter hopeless bitterness, that Mr. Plew was silent for a moment. What could he oppose to that despair? But he presently made a brave effort to speak again.

"Yes, Veronica, your husband! If I cared less for you I should not have the courage to oppose you. But I *must* tell you, I *must* urge you to consider well that your husband is your natural friend and protector. No one can come between you and him. It cannot be that reconciliation between you is hopeless. You are both young. He loves you. He seemed gentle and——"

She burst out into a storm of passionate tears.

"Oh, what shall I do? what shall I do? No one will believe me! no one will understand! Did you read my letter? I ask, did you read it? Gentle! yes, he is very gentle!"

Oh, very, very gentle! As velvet-footed as a tiger-cat! Would you like to see the mark of his claws?"

With a sudden fierce movement she tore open the long lace sleeve that she wore, and bared her arm to the shoulder. There were on the white, tender flesh two livid marks made by the brutal pressure of a clasp ing hand.

"Good God! you did not say—you did not tell me that he struck you!"

Mr. Plew's white face grew livid, and then turned crimson. He clenched his hand involuntarily.

"Oh no! He did not strike me! He merely held me down in my chair with gentle violence, endeavouring to make me promise to receive a woman whom he desired to invite, and who had openly insulted me. I cried out with the pain, but I would not promise. I said he might kill me first."

"Oh, my good Heavens, this is dreadful!"

"I should not have escaped so easily—and perhaps I might have given way, for he hurt me, and I dread pain, I never could bear pain—and—and I am afraid of him. Oh, you don't know what deadly fear I am in sometimes! But a servant came into the room by

chance, and I ran away and locked myself up."

"But—but he was sorry—he asked your pardon—what a damned cowardly brute the fellow must be!" cried Mr. Plew, suddenly breaking down in his efforts to preach patience to Veronica.

"When I showed him the marks next day, he said I had provoked him by my obstinacy, and that if I had had an English husband he would have beaten me within an inch of my life for my disobedience."

Mr. Plew got up and walked about the room, wiping his hot forehead with his handkerchief.

Presently he came back to the sofa. His eyes were full of tears. He took her hand in one of his, and placed his other hand on her head.

"Poor child!" he said. "Poor, unhappy child! Veronica, I would lay down my life to bring you comfort."

As he so stood looking at her with a tender compassion that was almost sublime in its purity from any alloy of self, the door was opened quickly and quietly, and Cesare de' Barletti stood in the room.

CHAPTER XV.

INFELICE !

CESARE advanced into the room silently, with his eyes fixed on his wife. He was very pale, and his hand plucked at his moustache with the lithe serpentine motion of the fingers that was so suggestive of cruelty. Veronica, when she saw him, started violently, and dropped Plew's hand. The surgeon stood firm and still, and looked at Cesare quietly, neither apprehensive nor defiant. For some seconds no one spoke. The room was as still as death. Cesare's eyes quitted his wife's face, and wandered round the boudoir, looking more than ever like the inscrutable eyes in a picture on which you cannot get a good light. This glance took in every detail of the scene. The preparations for supper, the half-emptied flasks of wine; above all, his wife's torn sleeve, and the wasted arm with its livid bruises. Then he spoke.

think of your conduct," said the little surgeon. "How you treat *me* matters little——"

"It matters nothing. You are right. It matters not that!" returned Barletti, snapping his fingers close to the surgeon's face. The latter stood like a rock.

"You had better take care," said he quietly. "You might chance to touch me if you did that again."

"And if so? Even if so, eh? *Maledetta canaglia che tu sei!*"

Plew did not understand the words, but the look and tone that accompanied them were intelligible enough. He coloured high, but spoke still in the same quiet manner, that in its unaffected manliness had a certain dignity.

"You have told your wife in my presence that you had an antipathy to me—why, Heaven knows!—and that you had desired never to see me in your house. Even had I known this, I do not think it would have prevented me from coming——"

"Without doubt! Oh, without doubt! He is pleasant, this buffone!"

"But I did not know it. And my errand here to-night was—partly—to deliver a message to your wife from her father."

"You lie !"

"Cesare ! Per pieta !" cried Veronica, rising and holding up her hands as though to shut out the words from the surgeon's ears.

"Don't be afraid, Veronica," said Plew, with a quivering lip. "I am not a child to be carried away into passion by a vile vulgar insult from one whom I despise."

"Be silent, then !" cried Cesare, turning on her with savage fury. He spoke now in his own language, and poured out a torrent of opprobrious taunts and invectives with the volubility of an angry lazzarone.

He was jealous of Mr. Plew. Wild and incredible as the idea appeared to Veronica, it nevertheless was so. Some jesting word dropped by the vicar about Mr. Plew's old adoration for his daughter had first attracted his attention to the behaviour of Veronica towards this man. He had been struck by the unexampled fact of her taking the trouble to write letters to him from Shipley Magna. He had more than once told Veronica, as the reader knows, that the village surgeon was, as he phrased it, *antipatico* to him. Still she persisted in communicating with him. Cesare had watched the posting of her letters. Why should she care to write to

Mr. Plew? Friendship? Bah! He was not a fool. What friendship could there be between a beautiful brilliant young woman like his wife and a man who, however unattractive he might be in Cesare's eyes, was still far from old, and, moreover, had loved Veronica in years gone by? Che, che! If she did not love him, she allowed him to make love to her. Cesare's jealousy was alert and furious at the thought. Then one night he comes home unexpectedly and finds this man with his wife—with his wife who had refused to go out with him in spite of his urgent request to her to do so. She had been complaining of him, too, to this accursed doctor. Did he not see the torn sleeve, the uncovered arm? There was no reproach that could lacerate a woman's feelings that he did not heap on her in his fury.

"Oh, merciful Heaven!" she cried, pressing her hands to her throbbing temples, "this is more than I can bear. Listen, Cesare. Since you are possessed with this insanity—yes, insanity! I would say so with my dying breath—I will tell you now the truth. I cannot remain with you. I have made up my mind to separate from you and to live apart. You may have all the money—all the wicked,

weary money ; give me only enough to live on, and let me go. I am broken, and crushed. I only want peace."

"You hear the Signora Principessa !" said Cesare, resuming for a moment his mocking sneer. "You hear her ! Cannot you, you valued friend, persuade her to be wise ? I am her husband. Ah, I know your English law ! I am master, she is slave. Cannot you advise her ? But I fear you are not yourself very wise ! You give her wine. See, here is the fiasco nearly void. Do you not know that she has too great penchant for the wine, *la nostra cara principessa* ? Or did you perhaps teach her to love it, like the rest of the Inglesi ?"

"You are more base and contemptible than I could have believed it possible for a man to be. I shall not remain longer beneath your roof. But I would have you to know, and to understand, and to lay to heart, that this lady is not without friends and protectors, and that the English law, which you profess to know so well, does not permit you to treat her with the gross brutality to which I can bear witness."

"Giuro a Dio !" cried Cesare, in a transport of fury. "This to me—to me ! *You* are perhaps her protector—cane maledetto !"

"Don't go!" screamed Veronica, clinging to the surgeon's arm, and cowering away from her husband. "He will kill me when you are gone!"

With a tremendous oath Cesare seized a knife from the table, and made a thrust at the surgeon. At the same instant Veronica threw herself between the two men, and the knife, glancing off Plew's thick coat, was plunged into her side.

"Oh God! Veronica!" cried the surgeon, supporting her in his arms, and, as her weight sank, kneeling down upon the ground, and resting her head on his knee. "Oh my beloved!"

Cesare stood transfixed and motionless, looking at the flowing blood, the dark dishevelled hair that covered the surgeon's knee, the white face of his hapless wife.

"Get assistance! Call for help! You have murdered her. Veronica! Veronica!"

"Is—*is* she dead?" said Cesare. Then, without waiting for a reply, he rushed out of the room with a rapid noiseless step, descended the stairs with headlong vehemence, and was gone. The surgeon's cries presently brought up a crowd of scared servants, most of them heated and flustered with a revel they had been holding in their own domain, and which

had prevented their hearing Cesare rush down the stairs and from the house. There was a chorus of exclamations ; a confused Babel of voices. Some of the women screamed murder.

"Be quiet, for God's sake ! Help me to lay her on the couch."

He had stanchd the blood as well as he could, but it still flowed, and as they lifted her to place her on the couch it broke forth afresh, and left a ghastly trail that marked their path across the gaily-flowered carpet.

"Go for a doctor instantly ! Go you !" said Mr. Plew, singling out one man who looked less scared and more self-possessed than the others. He was a groom, and had not long been in the prince's service.

"I am a medical man myself," said Mr. Plew, "but I must have assistance."

The man set off, promising to make good speed. Several doctors lived within a short distance of the house. He would not return without some one. Mr. Plew then asked for water and linen, and sending the other men away, he made two of the women assist him to do what could be done. They laid a white sheet over her, and put pillows and cushions beneath her head. In a few minutes, as he hung over her with an agonised face, she opened her eyes.

"Lord be merciful! She's alive!" cried one of the women.

Mr. Plew checked her by putting his hand over her mouth.

"Be quiet. It's a matter of life and death that you should be quiet. Veronica," he added, putting his lips near to her ear and speaking very softly. "Do you know me?"

She formed the word "yes" with her colourless lips. Then her eyes languidly wandered about the room as though in search of some one. Then for the first time Mr. Plew remarked Cesare's absence. He had hitherto had eyes and ears only for her.

"Where is—your master?" he asked of one of the women, interpreting Veronica's look.

"Master? Master? I don't know! Did he come in?"

"Yes, yes, he was here. He was here just now."

"Then," cried one of the women, clasping her hands, "was it *he* that done it?"

Veronica made a violent effort to speak. "It was not all his fault," she gasped. "I—fell—on—the knife."

The exertion was too great for her, and she swooned again. In a few moments the groom returned, bringing with him the doctor and a policeman.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE END.

“THERE is not the least hope. You had better send for her friends at once. Are they in London? She cannot last many hours.”

The sickly grey dawn was creeping in at the windows of the room where Mr. Plew had watched all night by the side of the dying girl. Dying? Ah yes, too surely. Before his colleague's verdict had been uttered, Mr. Plew had known full well, although he had striven against the knowledge, that it was beyond mortal skill to save her. The light of a shaded lamp struggled with the dawn. They had not dared to remove Veronica from the couch on which she had been placed at first. The growing daylight gradually revealed more and more of the horrible aspect of the chamber. The contrast of its gaudy richness and bright gilding, with the awful

stains that ran along the floor, and with the ghastly whiteness of the covering that concealed the helpless form on the sofa, and with the livid face and forlorn dishevelled hair tossed wildly around it, was horrible.

They had cut the hair off roughly here and there, in jagged ends, to keep it from distressing her by its long abundance. Both the doctors had at first concurred in thinking that there might be some hope. When it was desired to take her deposition, the medical men had said, that to disturb her with questions would be at that moment infallibly to kill her. With a little quiet and patience she might be able by-and-bye to speak.

Meanwhile search was being made for her guilty husband, who, it was clear, had fled from the consequences of his crime. But after a few hours a violent fever set in. From that moment Mr. Plew knew that she was doomed. She had been delirious all night, and had asked constantly for water, water, water. But she spoke chiefly in Italian. Her faithful, loving friend had watched by her through the long night of agony, such as breaks the heart and blanches the head. Then with the first grey of morning came the words that head this chapter :

“There is no hope.”

Her father had been telegraphed for, but it was scarcely possible that she should survive to see him let him make the utmost speed he could.

After the long night of pain, fever, and delirium, the first rays of morning found the sufferer sleeping. It seemed not, indeed, so much a sleep, as a lethargy, that weighed on her eyelids, surrounded by a livid violet circle that made the pallor of her cheeks and brow startling.

“Has any news been heard of the man—the Prince Cesare?” asked the London physician, in a low voice, of Mr. Plew. The former had not passed the whole night by Veronica’s couch, as her old friend had done. He had contented himself with sending a nurse, and promising to come again in the early morning. This promise he had kept. Mr. Plew shook his head in answer to the physician’s question.

“I hope they’ll catch the villain,” said the physician.

Mr. Plew at that moment had no thought or care for Cesare’s punishment. His whole soul seemed to hang upon the prostrate form from which the life was ebbing with every breath.

"The magistrate will be here by-and-bye," said the doctor.

"She must not be disturbed!" said Mr. Plew. "She must not be tortured."

The physician slightly shrugged his shoulders, and looked at the sleeper with a cool compassion in his face. "They must not delay very long, if they want to see her alive. The end is near," said he.

Mr. Plew remained perfectly still, watching her face, from which he did not withdraw his eyes for a moment even in addressing the other man. His hands were folded together on his breast. In his heart he was praying that she might regain consciousness and recognise him before the end.

"O Lord, may this grace be vouchsafed to me!"

So ran his prayer.

Mr. Plew was not unskilled in his own science, and he did not pray for her recovery. That, thought he, would be a miracle! A man cannot hope for a miracle. It did not occur to him that any special answer to special prayer must be miraculous. The human heart is complex and illogical, and deduces many contradictory inferences from the simplest premise. Half an hour passed. Then

there came a ring at the door, which sounded with painful metallic vibrations through the hushed house.

"I will go down and see them," said the physician, divining who the early visitors must be; and not sorry to leave a scene in which he could be of no use.

"She must not be disturbed," said Mr. Plew, still without moving or changing the fixed direction of his glance. The other nodded, and noiselessly left the room. The hired nurse sat with closed eyes in a chair in a distant corner of the room. She was not fully asleep. But she took a measure of repose, in the half-waking fashion rendered familiar by her avocations. There was a muffled sound of feet below; the closing of a door—then all was still.

Suddenly the surgeon's gaze, instead of looking on closed, violet-tinted eyelids, with their heavy black fringe, met a pair of wide-open haggard eyes, that looked strange, but not wild: there was speculation in them.

"Mr. Plew!"

The whispered sound of his own uncouth name was like music in his ears. All the night she had been calling on Cesare, begging him to save her from *that other*; imploring

him to give her a drink of water ; appointing an hour for him to meet her in the Villa Reale ; always associating him with some terror or trouble. She had spoken in Italian. But her husband's name, and one or two other words, had sufficed to give the watcher an idea of the images that filled her poor fevered brain.

"My dearest," he answered.

She feebly moved her hand, and he took it in his own. She closed her eyes for a moment, as though to signify that that was what she had desired him to do.

Then she opened her eyes again, and looking at him with a terrible, wide stare, whispered, "Shall I die?"

His heart was wrung with a bitter agony as he saw her plaintive pleading face, full of the vague terror of a frightened child. He pressed her hand gently, and stroked the matted hair from her forehead. He tried to speak comfort to her. But it was in vain. He *could* not tell her a lie.

"Don't let me die! I am very young. *Can't* I get better? Oh, can't I get better? I am so afraid! Keep me with you. Hold my hand. Don't let me die!"

"Veronica! My only love! Be calm Have pity on me."

"Oh, but I am afraid. It is so dreadful to—to—die!"

She hid her face against his hand, and moaned and murmured a little incoherently.

"Our Father, have mercy upon her!" sobbed the surgeon. Even as he sobbed, he was careful to suppress the convulsive heaving of his chest as far as it was in his power to command it, lest it should shake the hand she clung to.

Again she moved her head enough to enable her to look up at him. "You are good," she said. "You can pray. God will hear you. Will he?—will he hear you? Oh yes, yes, you and Maud. You and Maud—you and—— Do you see that tombstone in St. Gildas's graveyard? I dreamt once that I was going to marry you, and *he* started out from behind the tombstone to prevent it. That was a dream. But the tombstone is there: white, all white on the turf. Don't you see it?"

"Veronica! Do you hear me?"

"Yes: Mr. Plew. Poor Mr. Plew. He loved me. Was it you?"

"I loved you. I love you. Listen! Do you think you can pray?"

"O-h-h-h! I'm afraid! But if you say—if you say it—I will try."

He uttered a short prayer.

"Do you forgive all those who have done you wrong?"

"Forgive! I am very sorry. I *am* sorry. I hope they will forgive me. Yes: I forgive."

"My darling, let me kiss you. You are not in pain?"

"N-no. It is so dark now! That old yew-tree shades the window too much. But we shall go away where there is more light, shan't we? We won't stay here."

"We will go where there is more light, my treasure. Lean your dear head on my arm, beloved. So. You are not frightened now?"

"Not frightened now; tired—so tired! How dark the yew-tree makes the window! Ah!"

She gave a long quivering sigh, and dropped her head quite down upon his hand.

When they came to see if the sufferer could be spoken to, they found him standing rigid with her fingers clasped in his. He raised his hand to warn them to be silent as they entered.

"She must not be disturbed!" he whispered.

"Disturbed!" echoed the physician, advancing hastily. "She will never be disturbed more. My dear sir, you must compose your-

self. I feel for your grief. You were evidently much attached to the unfortunate lady. But there is no more to be done—she is dead!”

* * * * *

Several years later there arrived in Leghorn from the United States, an Italian—a Sicilian he called himself—who was supposed by those who understood such matters to be mixed up with certain political movements of a republican tendency in the South. He was an agent of Mazzini, said one. He was a rich adventurer who had been a fillibuster, said another. He was a mere chevalier d'industrie, declared a third, and the speaker remembered his face in more than one capital of Europe. Doubtless he had been attracted to the neighbourhood of Florence by its recent elevation to the rank of a metropolis. Or it might be that he had made New York too hot to hold him.

One night there was a disturbance at a low café in Leghorn near the port, frequented chiefly by Greek sailors. A man was stabbed to the heart, and his assassin, a certain Greek of infamous character named Polyopolis, was condemned to the galleys for life.

Of the murdered man little was known.

The landlord of the café deposed that he had entered his house together with the Greek ; the latter seeming more boastfully insolent and elated than was his wont, that he (the landlord) perceiving that the stranger was of a different class to the generality of his customers, was induced by curiosity to pay some attention to his conversation (in other words, to listen at the door of the miserable room occupied by the Greek), that he had heard the two men quarrelling, and the Greek especially insisting on a large sum of money, reiterating over and over again that twenty thousand francs was a cheap price to let him off at. He supposed there had been a struggle, for he had soon heard a scuffling noise, and the voice of Polyopolis crying out that he should not serve him as he had served his wife ! He had got assistance, and broken open the door. The stranger was dead : stabbed to the heart. *Che vuole ? Pazienza !* Polyopolis had tried to escape by the window, but was too great a coward to jump. So they caught him. That was all he knew. *Ecco !*

The murdered man was known in Leghorn as Cesare Cesarini. But there was more than one distinguished noble who could have given a different name to him. But they never

thought of doing so. The man was dead. There had been sundry unpleasant circumstances connected with his history. And would it not have been exceedingly *inconvenient* to stir up such disagreeable recollections, to the annoyance of a really illustrious Neapolitan family, who had become quite the leaders of society since their influx of wealth from the sale of some property to an English company that afterwards went to smash?

Che, che! let bygones be bygones!

So Cesare de' Barletti sleeps in a pauper's grave, and his own people know his name no more.

Maud was not told of Veronica's tragic fate until some weeks after her marriage; her husband feeling that it would cast a deep gloom over the early brightness of their wedded life. Her grief, when she knew the truth, was sincere and intense. And her only consolation was—as she often said to the poor surgeon—to know that her dear girl had died with his loving hand in hers, and not been quite lonely and abandoned at the last.

The vicar's affliction was more demonstrative, but briefer than Maud's. He soon had troubles enough in the present to prevent his brooding over the past. His young wife

speedily discovered the anomalous nature of her position : not received by the gentry, and looked on with cold jealousy by those of her own class. She became fretful and slatternly, and turned out to have a shrewish tongue, and to be energetic in the using of it. And her vulgar family established themselves in the vicarage, and lorded it over the vicar as only the callousness of vulgarity can.

Old Joanna left her old master with regret. But, as she said, she could not stand being crowed over by Mrs. Meggitt. The faithful old woman went to live with Mrs. Hugh Lockwood, whose children—especially a bright-eyed little girl, named Veronica—she spoiled with supreme satisfaction to herself, and under the delusion that her discipline was Spartan in its rigour.

Miss Turtle inherited a trifling legacy from a bachelor uncle, who was a tradesman in London ; on the strength of which legacy she set up a day-school for the children of small shopkeepers, and such persons. As she was very gentle, very honest, and very industrious, she prospered. She never married, and she and Mr. Plew continued fast friends to the end of their days.

Of the little surgeon—if these pages have

succeeded in portraying him as he was — it need not be said that his life continued to be one of humble usefulness and activity. He was never merry, and seldom—to outward observation at least—sad. Once a year he made a pilgrimage to London, where he visited a lonely tomb in a suburban cemetery. But of these visits he never spoke.

And it was observed in him, that while he was always kind and gentle to all children, he was especially attached to one of Maud's little girls. But he always gave her the uncouth name she had bestowed upon herself in her baby efforts to talk—Wonca!—and he never called her Veronica!

THE END.

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